

Chapter 1

She was dead.

The world was in flames. Voldemort sat on the Queen's throne in Westminster Abbey. Hogwarts was rubble. Diagon Alley was a collection point for muggleborns to be shipped to concentration camps. Continental Europe was on the verge of collapsing as the magical and mundane armies of Emperor Voldemort savaged those who stood against them. The Americans, Australians and the Brazilians had warded their continents. No one could come in.

It didn't matter.

She was dead.

Harry Potter, last surviving member of the Order of the Phoenix lay in a ditch in western Cornwall, a gentle rain soaking him. He was cuddling the corpse of his wife. Hermione Potter had died not even five minutes ago.

"Please God, don't let her be dead. I need her. Please, I'll do anything. Please God, don't let her be dead."

They had taken to stealing food from abandoned markets. The canned goods lasted nigh on forever and with a quick twist of the can opener, "Viola, a main course of Vienna Sausages complemented by Mandarin Oranges and French Cut Green Beans." They'd had that meal on their wedding night.

"Please God, don't let her be dead."

It all went to shit after Sirius died. Dumbledore had been poisoned in the Great Hall the next day. Harry was still reeling from the dual impact of Sirius' death and the disclosure of The Prophecy, so the twitching, foaming corpse of the Headmaster didn't make the impression on him that he thought it would. Hermione came to him that night in bed.

Harry looked around wildly as his curtains silently opened. "What the...?"

"Harry, it's just me. Budge over, we need to talk."

As he scooted over, she gingerly climbed in bed with him. Apparently, her wounds from the previous day were not as healed as Madam Pomfrey had declared. A few spells later, they were able to speak in privacy.

"I think we should leave school tonight," she began. When Harry's eyebrows almost reached his hairline, she waved him off and continued, "With Dumbledore dead, Voldemort will probably be here tomorrow. No one can stop him now. He'll come for you. After he kills you, he'll kill all the muggleborns."

She paused and let that sink in. Watching his eyes focus on the canopy of his four poster she saw him make his decision and sighed in relief. "Ok, where do we go?"

In the end, they had decided to leave Ron behind. They regretted the error for the rest of their lives. Four years later, they'd found a picture of him – or rather what was left of him. He had been drawn and quartered on his beloved Quidditch Pitch. Voldemort had indeed come the next day and his wrath was great.

Their broom ride had ended at her parents' home. They later thanked God many times that Steven and Alice had listened to them and fled the country. Today they were safe in St. Louis. Even Americans need dentists.

After a stop at Gringotts, the duo walked out with over a million pounds in cash and ten thousand galleons. Hermione made two purchases, a library trunk and a copy of every book in Flourish and Blott's inventory. Harry made three purchases; an invisibility cloak for Hermione, a Firebolt for her and a written copy of a charm that would remove the infamous 'Trace' from their wands. The charm had been the most expensive.

They went to Cardiff and rented a flat, theorizing that going muggle would protect and hide them. Not raising wards in order to avoid attracting attention, they set up their cover as a young married couple. They studied, laughed and cried. Reading the papers, they could interpret the magical events in the mundane news. Mass murders were taking place. The werewolves and vampires were on a rampage. Giants and dragons were attacking with impunity.

Times were becoming tough. Rationing was put in place. Petrol, food, and clothes were all limited in availability. The economy fell like a stone and a full scale depression hit Britain. Lines began to form outside employment offices.

The magical Ministry had fallen first. They found out later that Fudge had lasted a mere week and a half after Hogwarts fell. The mundane Government lasted three more years. Unprepared for the insidious attack via Imperius, midnight assassination and blackmail, Voldemort strode into the Houses of Parliament in early 1999.

Their studying had been fast paced. Not needing to slow their education for the lowest common denominator, Hermione taught Harry and, where possible, Harry taught Hermione.

Their studying far exceeded the standard Hogwarts curriculum. Harry had taken the lead on their combat training. Power spells, creative Transfiguration, offensive wards and battlefield healing were all covered in detail. When Hermione had asked Harry why they were having their intensive training, Harry had replied, "I've got to kill him."

They were fortunate that she was able to learn on her own from books. Toward the end of their time in Cardiff, two things happened that changed everything for them. First, Harry passed his practice NEWTs for Defence, Transfiguration, Charms, Runes, Arithmancy and even Potions. He'd given her quite a hard time for having the practice tests for a seventh year exam during their fifth year. The second happening was far more important.

He kissed her.

And she kissed him back.

They made love that night and didn't leave the bedroom for an entire day.

Their time in Cardiff had lasted three years. During that time they exchanged letters with her parents. In each one, Steven and Alice had begged the teens to come to America. They wanted to go. They talked about it time and again, but something neither could identify tethered them to Britain. They couldn't leave.

"We still don't know what 'the power the Dark Lord knows not' is!" Harry had raged one night. Having worked their way through a bottle of wine, they were half pissed and both were venting their frustrations.

"You feel obligated to do something because of this prophecy."

Nodding at her observation, he responded, "Yeah. I do."

Taking him in her arms, she gave him a hug. "Let's go see if Grimmauld Place is still the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix."

It was. Or rather, it was the headquarters of Minerva McGonagall, Filius Flitwick, Alastor Moody and Arthur Weasley. They were all that was left.

The reunion was subdued. Arthur enveloped them both in a long hug. His entire family was dead and he was a changed man because of it. Minerva, too, hugged them while Filius just watched them with a thousand yard stare.

Harry gave his former Transfiguration teacher a questioning look. "Filius has killed so many..." Minerva whispered.

Moody grunted as he took a swig from his flask. Nothing really changed there.

The group of six began to conduct raids on Death Eater supply depots. Potion supplies, body armour, food, medicines and clothing were all taken. They knew they weren't really making a dent in Voldemort's activities, but they needed what was stolen. For the first time in years, they all ate until full.

Two years after Harry and Hermione returned to the magical world, Moody was killed on a raid and again, things went downhill fast.

They'd taken to raiding Death Eater 'Entertainment Houses'. Torture chambers, brothels and casinos were other names for them.

The mercy and capture attitude that the Order had adhered to when Dumbledore had led them was a thing of the past. Killing fast and quick was de rigueur.

Moody had been killed in a raid on an Entertainment House. They'd expected a dozen Death Eaters to be inside but had run into three dozen. Harry had personally killed ten Death Eaters and Hermione twelve before they realized that Moody had bled to death.

The loss of the seemingly indestructible Moody hit them all hard. Flitwick had wandered off after that. He'd been increasingly erratic and it seemed that the last loss had been one too many

Arthur became more reckless and violent. He'd been crossing the line between engaging the enemy and killing for pleasure for quite a while. Harry and Hermione had a long talk with Minerva about it, but never had the opportunity to act. He died when he walked into Diagon Alley, killing everyone he saw. For all intents and purposes, it was suicide. Twenty seven Death Eaters died by his wand before he was cut down by no less than seven Killing curses.

Minerva pulled them aside after they lost Arthur. "I want you both to know that I love you like the children I've never had." The usually reserved woman was almost gushing and it took the young couple by surprise. Recognizing their expression, she smiled wryly and murmured, "I don't know how much time we have left together. I wanted you to know how much you mean to me."

A little teary eyed, Hermione gave the elderly Scot a hug while Harry kissed her cheek. "Thanks, Minerva. We love you too."

A runaway lorry hit her the next day.

Harry and Hermione had no hope of victory and they knew it. Moving to a small cottage in Cornwall, they tried to live their lives in obscurity, hidden from the red eye of Voldemort in the tall grass of the muggle world. It was too late to try and flee. Now, no one got out of Britain-that-was.

They had another five years of bliss alternating with fear. Finally, they'd formalized their relationship and the local Vicar had married them in their lounge. Their neighbours, John and Leigh St. James, had stood up with them.

Two years later, they'd been on a scrounging mission when they'd bumped into their worst nightmare. A Death Eater squad walked in

on them at the remains of the local grocers. It had been a quick fight. The seven Death Eaters were dead within thirty seconds, but not before Hermione was hit by a Killing curse.

"Please God, don't let her be dead."

But she was.

Weeping now, he closed her eyes and apparated them to their home. The rain continued as he lovingly lay her on the chaise lounge and conjured a shovel. His hair matted to his head, rain running in his eyes, he dug his wife's grave amidst her much-loved flowers. After burying her in their garden, he fashioned a headstone for her and laid it atop her final resting place.

Hermione Jane Potter
Born September 19, 1979
Died November 22, 2006
Beloved Wife and Daughter
The Smartest Witch of the Age

Harry didn't leave the house for over a year. John and Leigh brought him food. Vicar Smythe stopped by weekly for a half hour. Otherwise, he saw no one and no one saw him.

The first month he drank himself into torpor and stayed there. John St. James took all of Harry's whiskey after that and forced the young widower to sober up. With nothing left, he studied and read. There was one purpose in his pursuits: find a way to save Hermione.

He realized he'd gone a little crazy. She was dead. He had buried her with his own hands after all. First he'd pursued an answer in Necromancy, but the rituals were either ineffective at restoring her (such as creating an Inferius) or so morally repugnant that he knew she'd hate him if he successfully brought her back with it.

Time turners were an interesting but eventually fruitless path. He found quite a few overviews of the devices, but since they were highly restricted artefacts, there was no detailed information on the mechanics of the device. Four times he'd failed in trying to build time turners, although the last had generated quite a powerful explosion that had levelled his workshop.

He chuckled as he lay in bed reading Essays in Advanced Theoretical Thaumaturgy, vol. MMCXII by Viridian Starkan. "If only Hermione could see me now." Snorting and shaking his head, he corrected himself, "If only Ron could see me now."

What he was reading banished all thoughts of his old friend far from his mind.

... conjuring the balanced spatial tensions required to create a temporal shift. The focus of the dynamic interface would be a curved field, the parameters of which would be dependent of the magnitudes of the forces involved. Any object that crossed through this curved field would experience a temporal translation, the magnitude of which would also be varied as the interacting forces were altered.

"Dear God. It's time travel."

Hermione had taught him well and it was immediately apparent to Harry that he was in a quandary. The temporal translation described would allow a 'steerable' opening in the temporal timeline. This would allow him to select the target time to which he wished to return. However, no material would be able to be sent through the field. No material unless one was able to channel all the natural magical energy in the planet. Since that wasn't possible, what could be sent?

To most persons, the natural conclusion of the line of thought would have been horrifying. To Harry, who was half crazed with loss and despair, the idea of killing himself in the hopes that his spirit would go back in time was not horrifying at all.

"Even if it doesn't work, I still get to see her again. At least, if Luna was right I'll see her again."

So began his calculations. Seven different times he calculated his 'trip' as he began to call it. The first five all came up with different answers. Not inspiring. The sixth and seventh calculations had the same results.

He felt far from confident in his figuring. If the gemstones that were to be used to generate and focus the temporal field were slightly off angle, his spirit would explode and he'd cease to exist.

He polished off another stale can of stout and threw the can in the bin. "Fuck it. What have I got to lose?"

The next morning, he did something he'd never done before. He went to the local church to pray. He wasn't a believer in the Anglican faith, but he sure needed something now.

Staring at the altar, he murmured, "Please, God. Help me."

He didn't even realize that it was Christmas day.

After an hour of pleading with the Deity, he returned home. He'd needed a dozen diamonds, so he'd stolen them from a jewellery store two days before. Not many people could afford such luxuries nowadays. He doubted if the theft would be noticed.

Calculations in hand he went to the only place it made sense to him to perform the ritual and begin his trip. He dumped the diamonds on Hermione's grave and began to lay them in the required pentagonal shape.

Three hours later, he'd laid out the stones and verified their positions four times. Stripping off his clothes, he shivered as he knelt in the centre of the diamond pentagram. There was no turning back. He incinerated his notes.

Muttering the charging spell, he first felt drained, then saw the diamonds begin to glow a dull blue. The temporal translation field was charged. Tears began to drip down his face as he sat on the ground. A full five minutes passed as he sat there, naked in the dirt. Rain began to fall, mixing with his tears. It was as if the heavens were weeping with him. For him.

"I love you Hermione."

He placed his wand to his chest over his heart and whispered, "Diffindo."

.oOo.

Falling.

Pain.

Noise.

Darkness.

.oOo.

With a jarring thud, he stopped falling. Opening his eyes, he gasped for air. Once. Twice. Frantically, he looked around, trying to determine when he had shown up. Had he travelled through time, or had the experiment ended badly? Perhaps he was in hell and didn't know it yet. Colours swirled and melded together. Later he would describe it like an exploding rainbow. Shapes began to form.

He was staring at the strangest thing. It was familiar but he just couldn't place it.

Grey feathers. Orange eyes.

Buckbeak.

It worked.

First things first, Harry quickly bowed. He maintained eye contact with the regal hybrid creature for a long moment. When the half eagle, half horse bowed in return, Harry let go the breath he'd been holding and approached his old friend with a little tear in his eye. Gently patting the Hippogriff's beak, he barely heard Hagrid's congratulations and follow on instruction to the class.

She's behind me.

He almost burst into tears at the thought. His head swirled and his guts clenched. Hermione is right behind me. Maybe ten or fifteen feet away. Please God, let her be behind me.

The murmur of the class seemed a cacophony. Hagrid's voice boomed a bass tone that reverberated in his chest. None of the words meant anything. She's behind me.

After a steadying breath, he turned.

She was there.

Before he could scream for joy, he noticed her face was in a grimace and she was holding her chest as if she'd been kicked. Her eyes darted left, then right. Locking onto his face, she looked like she didn't know him at first. Then, the largest smile she'd ever had blossomed on her face and she ran to him.

It was the first time he'd ever experienced a complete loss of control of his limbs. He ran to her. Unknowingly, unthinkingly, he ran to her. Desperately embracing his once and future wife, she in turn crushed him to her. He didn't even realize it but he was murmuring her name over and over in a half sob.

"Oh, Harry."

He pulled back and almost fell down in shock.

Right after their wedding, they'd been working in the garden of their home in Cornwall, building a trellis. Hermione had slipped and split her brow open on a small boulder they used as a seat. Feeling embarrassed about her clumsiness, she wouldn't heal it with magic nor let Harry heal it either. "It's an object lesson for me to be more careful."

She developed a scar that made a small line through her right eyebrow.

Looking at her thirteen year old self, the blood ran into his toes. She had the same scar.

Tentatively reaching out to her, toward her scar, he asked in a whisper, "Hermione?"

Fingering her brow, she teared up and nodded. "Yes, love. It's me," She answered in a similar whisper.

"How?"

She shrugged and then smiled through her tears. "I'm sure you screwed something up."

He laughed, "I'm sure I did." Pulling her close, he almost broke down from happiness. He was back and by some miracle of heaven, so too was she.

.oOo.

"So, er, what was going on back there?" asked Ron. They were heading back to the castle after the 'exciting' Care of Magical Creatures class. The whole class had been so agog with Harry and Hermione's display of affection that Malfoy had forgotten to be his normal prickish self. The altercation with Buckbeak never happened.

His arm around Hermione's shoulders, a smiling Harry asked, "What do you mean mate?"

With red-tipped ears, Ron waved his hands and sputtered. "What do I mean? I mean you two!" he waved his hand at his best friends.

Harry glanced at his wife? Girlfriend? Best Friend? She gave him a nod. "We're together," he answered Ron.

Ron's face froze, then began to fill up with red.

Harry and Hermione were both confused. They were excited to have another chance with their red headed friend but didn't understand his upset. They stood there, bemused, while their old friend showed all the typical Weasley signs for an impending temper tantrum.

Setting his jaw, Ron nodded and said, "I see. I'll just leave you lovebirds to it so you can go snog, right?" and he jogged up the trail to the castle.

"What the fuck was that about?" Harry mused aloud.

Watching Ron run away, Hermione absently reproved, "Language, love. Beats me. You said he had a crush on me fourth year, right?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe it started third year?"

"Maybe." He stopped, pulling her up as he let the rest of class pass them by. Malfoy sneered as he passed but the Potters didn't even notice.

After the other third years had passed, he placed his arms around her waist in their accustomed place to which she responded with her arms around his neck. "So are you still my wife?" he asked a little tongue in cheek.

Smiling, she answered with a passionate kiss that curled his toes and increased his heart rate. A minute later, she was backed up to a tree, her legs around his waist.

"Harry, wait."

Collecting himself, he pulled back and took a deep breath. "Sorry, it's been a while and I think the teenage hormones are kicking in something fierce."

She smiled as she straightened her skirt. There was something predatory about her smile that made Harry's own smile broaden. She grabbed his tie and pulled him close, "We've been married for over two years and been intimate for almost ten. When we have some privacy, I'm going to shag you rotten. Just not here in the open, Ok?"

He smiled and gave her a tender kiss. She saw a tear on his cheek and wiped it away with the pad of her thumb. "Hey now. We're together. We've got another chance, why the tears?"

Hugging her tight, he sobbed, "I missed you so much."

Holding him close, she let his storm pass. Finally, she asked, "How long?"

"When I woke up this morning, you'd been gone for over a year."

She shuddered, "I don't remember anything. Last thing before showing up in class was those Death Eaters at the grocers."

He nodded and they started to amble to the castle, hand-in-hand. With a small smile, she cast a spell on his face to clean him up. Grateful, he squeezed her hand. "Should we tell anyone?"

She scowled, "Not Dumbledore. I trust him about as far as you could throw him."

In the years after Hogwarts, they'd had many discussions about Harry's life. With all the danger, pain and heartache Harry had in his life, they kept coming back to Albus Dumbledore. Being taken from Sirius and deposited in the loving embrace of his 'relatives'. The Stone. The Chamber. Sirius' imprisonment. The Tournament. The Ministry misadventure. All of it circled back to Albus Dumbledore's manipulations and secrets.

"Agreed. I was thinking about McGonagall and Sirius, when we make contact with him, that is.

Hermione made a face. "I know you loved, or rather love him. But Sirius isn't really stable right now, sweetie."

Sighing, he nodded, "True. Maybe later?"

Conceding his desire, she nodded back. "Sure. We'll get him with some mind healers and nutritionists to help heal his mind and body. From there, we can talk. Ok?"

He shrugged his acceptance and squeezed her hand. "What about Remus?" he asked.

She pursed her lips. "My first reaction is no. He owes a lot to Dumbledore and the old man may call in his markers. Remus is too honourable and this would put him in quite a bind. I'd rather not tell him just yet."

He nodded. Glancing at her, he got a goofy grin, "Are you really gonna shag me senseless?"

Smiling in return, she answered, "Men."

.oOo.

"Hey! I get to play Quidditch again!"

"And take Divination again."

Dropping his head to his chest, he muttered, "Way to kill the buzz dear."

Hermione laughed in her musical way before she kissed him on the cheek. "I'm sure I can make it up to you."

He gave her a lecherous leer saying, "I'm sure you can." He reached across the Gryffindor table for the fixings for his lunch.

Wiggling her eyebrows, she finished making her own sandwich. Digging into their lunch, they both were overcome with waves of nostalgia. Hundreds of people around them were alive, when just yesterday –to them - they were dead. Even Ron sitting at the other end of the table where he was glaring at them was a very welcome sight.

It was like a kick to the gut when he looked to the front table. There, deep in discussion was a healthy looking Minerva McGonagall and a chuckling Filius Flitwick. Harry's head spun a bit as faces of the dead flashed at him. Dumbledore. Hagrid. Oliver Wood. Fred and George. Luna. Neville.

Looking over at the Slytherin table, he saw some whom they had helped when the world went in the crapper. Daphne and Astoria Greengrass. Tracy Davis.

Of course, his blood began to boil when he saw Draco Malfoy. The baby fat hadn't yet melted off the blond boy's cheeks and yet the fucker sat at the Slytherin table, smirking at Harry from across the hall.

He glanced at his wife and saw the same sad expression he was sure he must have as well and offered, "Pretty intense."

She nodded and sniffed, "Yeah, it is."

Taking a big bite of his sandwich, he heard her breath catch. Looking up, he saw Severus Snape stride in the hall for lunch.

Harry swallowed and reached for his wand. His instantaneous rage pounded in his ears like the drums calling to war.

As his hand dove in his pocket, a slim hand from his right grabbed his arm and Hermione hissed in his ear, "No! You can't kill him here in the Great Hall."

"I'm gonna fucking kill him." His fury was roiling his magic into a maelstrom and it pulsed in time with his heartbeat.

"Not here!"

Panting like a racehorse, Harry glanced down at his plate when Snape looked at him. He'd become fairly proficient in Occlumency after they left Hogwarts, but he had no idea if that ability transferred back in time with him. After some mental exercises this evening, he felt that he'd know where he stood. Until then, he'd just avoid eye contact.

Nodding to her, he relaxed his body. She rubbed his back and murmured, "I know he killed Neville and Luna. Probably Dumbledore as well. Who knows how many others he destroyed as the head of the camps. I want his head on a pike too, but we really need to talk about this. Are we going to execute people for things they did before? Things they have yet to do?"

"Him and that little shite Malfoy I have no problem killing."

"Come on. Let's get out of here. We need to cool off and talk for a bit."

Grabbing his hand, she half dragged him from the hall and out on the grounds. By now, Harry's rage had passed and after a few deep breaths, he was under control again. "Thanks, love."

Nodding to him, she smiled and replied, "I love you."

"Love you too. So, the real question is how much do we change?"

"Well, what was your plan?"

Looking at his feet, he muttered, "Didn't have one."

Knowing she was waiting for more, he looked at her. She moved closer to see her normally reserved husband in tears again. "My only

plan was to see you again. I didn't think about anything else for a year."

Moving close and gently taking him in her arms, she nodded and murmured, "I understand. I'd do the same."

Wiping his face, he laughed wetly. "Like hell. You'd have a plan tattooed to your hand."

She smiled and then put on a mock-affronted look. "If you're going to be insulting about it Mr. Potter."

"Not at all, Mrs. Potter. All in good fun."

She leaned on him and cocked an eyebrow, "Your swearing has become of the dockyard variety."

He grimaced. She truly did not like foul language. It made her uncomfortable and he'd made a real effort to eliminate his cursing. "Sorry. I was alone for a while and it just got out of hand."

Nodding, she smiled impishly, "I'll give you suitable encouragement to reform your behaviour."

"Now?" he asked with a leering grin.

She laughed and took off toward the lake, "Catch me if you can!" she shouted over her shoulder.

.oOo.

They lay in the tall grass on a short strip of grass between the lake and the Forbidden Forest, screened from the school by a stand of boulders. He caught her and they'd kissed for quite a while. "Been a while since we've had a good snog."

She rolled her eyes at him before he burst into laughter. "I know how much you hate that word," he teased, "I'm just having a bit of fun."

Poking him in the ribs, she said, "Enough funning. Let's get down to work. What is it that we could change and what should we change?"

"Wormtail."

"Agreed," she said as she conjured parchment and quill. "Barty Crouch Jr?"

"Kill him."

"Hmm," she stroked her chin with the quill. Turning to her spouse, she had a bit of grimace when she said, "We may need to leave him in place."

Harry began to get angry when he saw her point. "Let the Tournament happen then kill Voldemort in the graveyard. But what about Wormtail then? That's how the bastard gets to the graveyard in the first place."

"Crap." She lay back in the grass and stared at the clouds.

After a long moment in contemplation, Hermione asked, "What's our number one priority? Killing Voldemort, right?"

With a sigh of resignation, Harry agreed. "Yeah. Sirius gets the shaft."

Rising up to her elbow, Hermione scooted closer to her husband, "Not necessarily. If we capture the traitor in the graveyard, we can exonerate Sirius then." Sitting up fully, she began to think aloud, "Or, we could convince the DMLE to get a Veritaserum questioning for him."

"Sorry, love, the Dementors are already here. That means that fonging idiot Fudge has ordered the Kiss for ol' Padfoot."

Right before they'd married, he'd started using the term 'fong' instead of other curse words so as to be able to curse in front of his wife, but not be upbraided for it. Harry thought it was very clever of him. She tolerated his lunacy. He was male, after all.

Waving her hands at his negativity, she glowered, "As I said. If we get a Veritaserum questioning of him...or maybe we redo the Quibbler article but this time they interview Padfoot and not you? That could throw enough public doubt on the situation to warrant a real investigation and questioning."

Eyes wide and mouth curled in a smile, Harry jumped on Hermione. Laughing, they rolled about in the grass. She shrieked when he began to tickle her. Her retaliation caused squeals of laughter. They ended up entwined and lips pressed together in a passionate embrace that's usually not seen by couples a decade their senior.

Breaking apart, he whispered, "I love you so much.

"And I you, beloved." Running her hand through his hair in an affectionate, proprietary manner, she then kissed him on the forehead. "What class are we missing?"

Rolling off her, he exhaled. "No clue." His face scrunched up as a thought occurred to him. "Love, why are we staying in school? We both can pass our NEWTs today, much less OWLs."

Rolling over toward her, he propped his head on his hand and traced imaginary designs on her flat stomach. "We have plenty of money with my inheritance. We never have to work another day in our lives and we'd still leave our children a fortune. What do you say we kill Voldemort, free Sirius and then tell the world to bugger off?"

She smiled and rolled her eyes. "If I had any doubts that the person in your body was my husband, they've all been erased." Chuckling she said, "Love, if the Ministry ever found out that we've time travelled, do you really think they'd ever let us out of the Department of Mysteries? We have to play the part."

He scowled and nodded. "Too right. Fong."

Rolling on her side to face him. She played with the buttons on his shirt. "However, we can still be extremely mature teenagers who study hard and score exceptionally in their courses."

"Me?"

"Yes, you." She poked him in the chest. "After the incredible trauma of the Chamber and the Basilisk, you've realized that you really should apply yourself in your studies so you don't have to rely on luck." He looked at her blankly, "Or at least that's what we'll tell everyone."

He laughed and leaned in for a kiss. Afterwards he mentioned, "I'll need to see Minerva tonight. I'm not taking fonging Divination with that anointed sovereign of sighs and groans. I'll sign up for Runes and Arithmancy with you."

"And sit in the back and snog?"

He smiled widely, "If you insist, Mrs. Potter."

She sat up and looked about. Seeing no one, she Disillusioned both of them and then pulled him close. "I find us completely alone Mr. Potter."

"Indeed."

"I have need of you husband."

.oOo.

Two hours later, Harry and Hermione knocked on Professor McGonagall's office door.

"Enter."

Hearing her smooth burr again, they couldn't help smiling to each other as they entered the room.

Earlier, after picking grass and burrs out of each other's hair, they'd had quite a long discussion about the advisability of trusting anyone with their secret, even their old friend.

"Are you sure we should confide in Minerva?"

She frowned and replied, "Yes, I think so."

"She's Dumbledore's deputy right now. The woman who became a surrogate mother to us was very different than the woman who is up in the castle right now."

They went back and forth until Harry finally settled the discussion. "We'll tell her but if she reacts badly, I'll Obliviate her."

With a bit of a surprised expression, Hermione asked, "Do you really think that you can get the drop on her?"

His only response was a feral grin.

Back in the hallway, Hermione preceded Harry into the Gryffindor Head of House's quarters.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, what is amiss?"

Smiling at her, Harry couldn't help himself, "Amiss? Professor, why would you think that I'm here because something is amiss?"

The middle aged Scot merely cocked an eyebrow, which was tantamount to a belly laugh for her.

Hermione gave Harry a playful tap in the ribs and scolded, "Behave."

This comfortable, intimate interaction from two of her favourite students caused the other eyebrow to rise.

Settling back in her chair, Minerva Fraser McGonagall decided to let them explain to her what was happening.

Harry didn't keep her in suspense too long. "Minerva, we've an explanation for you that will explain our newfound attitudes and why I feel it appropriate to address you by your Christian name."

"This should be good," the Transfiguration Mistress muttered.

Two hours later, they'd opened a fifty year old Glenmorangie and were halfway down the bottle. Minerva's small pensieve had been liberally used and on many occasions, tears had been shed by all three.

Wiping her face of wetness after watching Filius' spiral into depression and assumed death, she asked, "What's your plan?"

"Kill Voldemort, free Sirius, tell Dumbledore to bugger off and live happily ever after."

Minerva half-glared at Harry before she chuckled. "Seriously, what is your plan?"

Harry sighed and unthinkingly took Hermione's hand in his. "I was a bit...distraught...when I came back. To tell the truth, we really don't have much of a plan. We skived our afternoon classes to have a bit of a talk. I think we've agreed that we need to let this and next year happen in the same manner as last time. In substance at least." Turning to Hermione, he saw her nod.

Harry's expression suddenly hardened, "But I have to tell you Min, I'm going to kill Snape before the year is out."

Having seen their memories and heard the explanation, McGonagall contradicted Harry. "No you're not." When he glared at her, she finished, "I am."

After a long silence, the three erupted in laughter. To an outsider, they'd be calling the local sanatorium to pick up their newest inmates. To a soldier who'd seen the wars, he'd understand completely. This Minerva hadn't fought in the war to come, but she'd fought and lost in the wars that had been. A phrase that the veterans of the American Civil war used was, 'They've been in the tall grass and seen the elephant.' There is camaraderie amongst soldiers that others can't understand.

Through his laughter, Harry said, "Never fuck with a Highland woman or she'll likely tear off your balls and shove them down your throat."

"And make you like it," finished Hermione. It was a favourite saying of theirs and had come about in similar circumstances, though the whiskey hadn't been so fine.

Minerva saluted them both with her glass before downing the remains in one go.

"You can't tell Albus any of this," the older witch declared forcefully. "His heart is fully for the light, but he'd try to Obliviate you both to hell and back before you could finish your first sentence."

Hermione nodded, "We'd already come to that conclusion. On top of that, Albus isn't really our friend." She explained about their conclusions regarding the Headmaster and his manipulations.

Minerva sat back in her chair, nursing her refilled whiskey. "Damn." She stood a little unsteadily. Drawing her wand, she cast a Sobriety charm on herself before walking to the window. Looking out over the grounds, she told her abbreviated tale.

"Did I tell you about my husband...before?"

"No, you didn't."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I loved Jamie from my earliest memory. We grew up together, attended Hogwarts together and married shortly after graduation. He was killed by Death Eaters when we'd been married for four years.

"Albus came to me and asked me to teach Transfiguration. He'd been selected to be Headmaster and I'd just attained my Mastery. I had nothing at home so I came. I threw myself into teaching and the fight against Voldemort"

Bowing her head, she said, "Albus gave me a reason to go on. Teaching and the fight kept me going. What you've told me," she waved at her pensieve, "and shown me, shakes all I've ever believed about him at the very foundations."

Harry and Hermione watched their head of house reminisce with more than a bit of apprehension. Harry's wand was in his hand, lying in his lap.

Hermione saw what he was doing and elbowed him. When he looked over at her, she frowned and shook her head in negation. He could almost read her mind, Not yet.

Nodding, he turned back to the woman he respected above most else on the planet and waited.

After a long moment, Minerva acceded to the desires of her heart. "I'll protect your secrets and help you with what I am able. I can do no less for my children, can I?"

A/N

1. I own nothing.

2. Just like Harry and Gabi, this story wouldn't leave me alone until I put it on electronic paper. Also, just like Harry and Gabi, this story is very back burner until I finish up what's directly in front of me. Of note, I've begun to edit and re-write To Stand Against the Darkness. I will repost when the entire story is complete. Don't expect anything for a few months, but when it starts to repost, the story will be finished.

3. Obviously, I've stolen significant plot devices from Viridian's Harry Potter and the Nightmares of Future's Past. I like to consider it flattery, not theft. Why invent a device for a fan fiction when Matthew created a fantastic device already? The italicized quote from in the text is lifted directly from NoFP. The big difference between NoFP and The End and the Beginning is twofold: Harry came back for his love in my fic. Everyone else is gravy. In NoFP he came back for them all. It seems a small difference, but will show up with some larger effects. The other difference is that Harry hadn't won. As such, he doesn't know how to beat his nemesis.

4. Just like all my other stories: Ignore Horcurxes.

Chapter 2

"Fong."

Hermione smiled, "Sleep well, Harry?"

The arm of his glasses held in his teeth, Harry rubbed his bloodshot eyes. "I'd forgotten how loud Ron snores. Around one, I gave up and Silenced him. On top of it, I wanted to kill Scabbers all night."

Chuckling softly, Hermione stood from her chair in the common room before shouldering her bag. Hooking her arm in her husband's she whispered, "My poor husband."

With a hint of a grin, Harry asked, "Can you kiss it and make it all better?"

She laughed as she rolled her eyes, "Come on, I'm hungry."

Walking down to the Great Hall was a little slice of Heaven for Harry. He'd dreamed about this repeatedly for the year he'd been without Hermione. His wide grin was contagious, so by the time they sat at the Gryffindor table both Potters were grinning like fools.

The emotional whiplash from the heights of joy to the depths of despair and back was beginning to wear on the time travellers, though.

Hermione spooned herself some porridge and as she was reaching for the sugar, she asked in a quiet voice, "How's your head?"

Harry nodded around his mouthful of eggs. They'd tested each other's Occlumency shields the previous night after leaving Minerva's office. After a bit of readjustment to their 'new' minds, both Harry and Hermione were satisfied they could keep the Headmaster and Potions Master out of their minds.

Pausing, as if he was reminded of something foul, Harry eventually replied, "I'm Ok. Had a bit of a headache last night, but nothing this morning." He didn't look her in the eye while his face paled somewhat.

She stared at him, knowing full well that he was hiding something. At the same time, she knew that Harry would tell her when he was ready. When they were teens – the first time, that is – she would have to badger and nag him until he told her what was on her mind. His first instinct was to hide any distress he felt and deny any reason for being upset. It was a product of growing up with those Dursleys. She hated them then and hated them now.

Sighing to mentally get back on track, she remembered how they'd made a breakthrough whilst in Cardiff during their 'preparation' phase. It was one of her most painful and wonderful memories. It was the day that Harry completely unburdened himself of his secrets. It was the day that he made the decision to trust her completely with himself.

Three days later they'd made love. The two decisions were inextricably linked for both of them.

She figured that Harry's nightmares were back. The nightly terrors were either of the Voldemort variety or just plain old regurgitations of the horrors they'd witnessed. Or it could be the horrors in which they'd participated. Those were the most unpleasant nightmares.

Just before moving to Cornwall and giving up their resistance to 'Emperor Voldemort', she and Harry cracked a bottle of gin and tried to count how many Death Eaters they'd killed.

They lost count at two hundred and thirty two for him and two hundred and nineteen for her. They didn't even try to estimate how many her lethal wards had killed. That magnitude of butchery changes a person, no matter how justified the acts.

The combination of those wonderful facts with sleeping in the same dorm room as his parents' betrayer spurred Hermione to wonder how Harry got any sleep at all.

Their discussion tapered off as they watched Luna Lovegood enter the hall. Luna looked very much as she had during their fifth year; pale blonde hair, protuberant blue eyes with pasty white skin. Instead of the usual preoccupied expression on her face, this morning Luna had a mixed expression of fear and determination. And she was staring right at Harry and Hermione.

"Uh, oh," Harry muttered.

Luna marched over to the mostly empty Table of Lions where she stopped right across from Hermione. Her gaze held both the Potters as she stated, "I don't understand why, but everything is different today and it's because of you two."

For the second time in her life, Hermione was stunned into silence. Harry, picked up the slack, "Will you join us for breakfast, Luna? We can have a chat after we've eaten."

Slowly, Luna sat on the bench across from the time travellers. Harry handed her the orange marmalade while Hermione poured her a cup of coffee. Luna blinked at the unsolicited provisions. "How did you know these are my favourites?"

With a soft, regretful voice, Hermione answered, "Because we're your friends."

Stunned, Luna just stared. Eventually, a slow smile drifted across her face. She repeated, "Friends," as she spread the marmalade across her toast. By the time she sipped her coffee, Luna Lovegood had the widest, most genuine smile she'd worn since her mother had died.

It was a slow meal. Luna was thoughtfully working her way through her stack of toast. She didn't revisit her earlier assertion and neither did Harry or Hermione. Harry and, to a lesser extent, Hermione were both still overwhelmed by the presence of everyone in the hall who had died in their previous incarnation. Luna was overwhelmed for wholly different reasons. She wondered how these people knew about her and, most importantly, she exulted in the fact that she now had friends.

Minerva entered the hall. Staying true to form, she didn't acknowledge the Potters. The three of them had discussed the issue and decided they didn't want to draw any untoward attention from those who would notice any outward show of affection.

Hermione tugged on Harry's sleeve, indicating she was ready. Harry caught Luna's attention, so the three students shouldered their satchels and made their way out the front doors toward the lake.

Once they settled on two of the benches near the lakeside and Hermione had cast a Privacy ward, Harry began. "Luna, we'd like to tell you some things, but there's a problem. Some of the people in the castle practice Legilimancy. Do you know what that is?"

When she nodded, he continued. "Good. The problem with telling you the story is that these persons who practice Legilimancy will not allow you to keep our secrets, they'll be able to pluck them from your mind against your will."

Luna's usual omnipresent ethereal aura was gone and had been replaced with a hard gaze. "Who?"

Hermione sighed, "That's part of the secret."

The second year Ravenclaw nodded thoughtfully. "It sounds as if we are at an impasse."

Crossing her legs, Hermione settled in a bit before she replied, "We can test your mind for its natural defences using Legilimancy to determine how well your mind is defended. Once we all get a feel for where you stand, Harry and I can help you with defending your thoughts."

Hermione stifled the sigh that was working up into her gullet. It had taken her and Harry years of painstaking effort when they were adults to become proficient Occlumencers. What hope was there that twelve year old Luna Lovegood would become proficient in the next decade?

With a hint of a shrug, Luna acquiesced, "Go ahead."

Harry drew his wand and incanted, "Legilimens."

Hermione hated to let Harry take the lead when it came to testing and probing others' minds with Legilimancy. In the end, though, Harry had much stronger capabilities in the discipline. Years of fending off Voldemort's long distance attacks had forced Harry to become a more than proficient Occlumencer. From there it was a short step to Legilimency. Necessity had been truly the mother of invention.

When learning the mind arts, usually women teach women and men teach men. In this case, though, it was necessary for Harry to test Luna. Not even Mad Eye had been able to keep Harry out of his mind.

The once and future Mrs Potter watched as Harry and Luna engaged in the usual staring match between the Legilimencer and Occlumencer. After a long minute, Harry muttered, "Finite." Turning to Hermione, he just shook his head in negation.

"Ok. We can begin studying soon." Seeing their blonde haired friend's downcast expression, Hermione reached out to take her hand. "None of that, now. This is a very difficult discipline and I've heard of no one who had natural defences strong enough to keep Harry out." She finished with a smile to which Harry rolled his eyes and snorted.

There was a long moment of silence as Luna smiled, savouring the fellowship amongst the three of them. Harry's eyes narrowed before he asked, "Luna, are you having...difficulties...with your possessions?"

Luna blushed and looked at her feet. "It's nothing; everything comes back in the end."

"Bullshit," spat Hermione.

Harry's shocked expression was mirrored on Luna's face. "Excuse me" the Ravenclaw asked.

"It's completely absurd to tolerate theft and harassment as acceptable. You're a good person, Luna, and it's not on to let these prats run roughshod over you."

Wide eyed, Luna sat stock still for an even ten seconds before she catapulted herself into Hermione's arms. "Thank you, thank you, thank you," she repeated in a joyous, sobbing litany.

Hermione sniffled as she held the blonde girl. Regret, shame, guilt and determination were warring within the time travelling teen. If anyone at Hogwarts should have empathized with Luna, it should have been Harry and her. They knew what it was like to be the

outside, shunned and unwanted. Yet in their original fifth year, Harry and Hermione had taken their turn as 'the popular people' and shunned Luna. Emotionally shunned her, that is. Never again Hermione resolved. The touching scene was interrupted by the first bell sounding over the grounds. Luna gathered herself up, wiping her cheeks and blowing her nose.

With gentleness from him that only Hermione recognized, Harry gave Luna an affectionate hug. It was the embrace from an older brother.

The Potters watched Luna scamper up the lawn to make her Transfiguration class. Harry and Hermione followed at a much more sedate pace. They had Runes and the classroom was across from the Great Hall.

"Was it bad?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head. After a quick survey both visually and magically to see if anyone was listening, he replied, "She's been alone since her mother died. Her dad threw himself into the Quibbler in the aftermath of the accident. Maybe he did it to avoid his grief, I don't know. I do know that he's noticeably absent from her memories for the last three or four years. On top of it, she's a dead ringer for her mum." He shook his head and exhaled forcefully, "I can't count how many memories there were of her crying herself to sleep."

Shamefacedly, Hermione sighed. "I can't help remembering how badly I treated her our fifth year. It helps that she isn't so...well, 'Luna' if you catch my drift."

"Yeah." Harry walked in silence for a bit before he came to the only logical conclusion. "I suppose her fanciful behaviour was a defence mechanism against the loneliness and grief she felt. After a bit, it became self perpetuating as she was scorned and rejected here. We'll have to better friends, this time."

Wrapping her arm around Harry's waist, Hermione nodded in agreement, "Yes, we will."

.oOo.

Roger Davies was very upset when Harry outlined the harassment that Luna was suffering. The sixth year Ravenclaw chaser thought highly of Harry, the whole 'Heir of Slytherin' issue aside. "I'll set them straight. Thanks for letting me know, guys."

"Runes was interesting," Harry commented as Davies left them behind and they made their way back to Gryffindor tower.

Hermione looked at her husband while a confused expression bloomed. "Huh?" she finally asked.

Harry smiled, "I know you did your best, but I kind of brute-force learned Runes 'before'. I never really got the patterns as they repeat through the Norse alphabet." He swallowed a smile and added under his breath, "Of course, I was lusting after you constantly while learning, so a few of your lessons may have been 'over my head' as they say."

She smirked, "I knew. Thank goodness that you finally got up the guts to kiss me. I was about to lose my mind and have my wicked way with you that night anyway."

A startled laugh burst out of Harry. "That's it, blame the guy."

Satisfaction purred up from her as she leaned into Harry, "You're learning."

Their laughter echoed off the high ceilings and stone walls as they passed through the Fat Lady's portal.

Approaching the stairs to the dorms, Harry told Hermione, "I'll just drop my books on my bed, meet you down here in a few?"

She nodded, "I've got to use the toilet, but I'll be down shortly."

He gave her a quick peck on the lips before running up the steps. This was the first time that he'd ever been truly joyful whilst at Hogwarts, he mused to himself. The 'first time through', there were many times when he'd been content and even happy. But now, with Hermione and he properly aligned and no immediate threat of death, he was joyful despite the dark clouds on the horizon.

He bounced through the doorway of the third year boys' dormitory, but before he reached his bed he heard a sneer. "So, I guess you're shagging her, now. Guess you're too good to hang with us low lifes. She must be a right tart, then. Maybe if I had a vault full of gold or nice tits you'd hang around with me."

The Boy-Who-Lived froze in place. When Harry got angry there was one of two outcomes: he either burst into a frenzied attack, or he stilled and became quiet. When he became quiet was when he was most dangerous. He'd once killed nineteen men after a loud mouthed Death Eater made comments about Hermione that were quite similar to those just uttered by one Ronald Bilius Weasley.

Slowly, he turned to face said Ronald Bilius Weasley who was sitting on his bed. "What did you say?" Harry whispered, his face a blank mask.

Something in Harry's tone, expression or manner clued Ron into the fact that he had gone too far this time. Somehow, he'd awoken the apex predator which lived in Harry. Too late, the youngest son of Arthur Weasley remembered that Harry had killed a Basilisk when he was twelve and beaten the most powerful dark wizard in a score of centuries when he was eleven.

What the redheaded teen didn't know was that, over a span of ten years, Harry had learned and perfected the art of killing as quickly and violently as possible. Though his thirteen year old body wasn't as conditioned and toned 'this time around', the results of that training still showed in how he carried himself. Most found it intimidating, but right now for Ron Weasley it was chilling.

The expression on Ron's face shifted from sneering anger and derision to fear and even terror.

Without thought, Harry dropped his satchel on his trunk before gracefully advancing on the redhead. As he glided forward, Harry rasped, "You've been a friend of mine for a long time, Ron. My first real friend in fact. Because of that, I'm going to overlook this...slight...against Hermione. The next time, I'm going to rip your tongue out of your head."

As Harry loomed over him, Ron began to frantically nod his head and squeak, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'll never say anything like that again!"

Stilling, Harry surveyed Ron. Realization dawned on The Boy-Who-Lived that Ron was a thirteen year old teen that had been extremely sheltered his whole life. In fact, Molly Weasley had stringently coddled her youngest two children. As a result, Ron was more immature than his physical age. It was an unpleasant realization for Harry.

Where circumstances had aged Luna Lovegood far beyond her twelve years, circumstances had retarded Ron's maturity to far less than his thirteen years. Even before 'resetting the clock', Harry and Hermione were far older than their birthdays indicated so he'd never noticed the differences in their redheaded friend. It was always 'Ron being Ron'. Now he saw differently.

All this flashed through Harry's mind in an instant. Shaking his head, Harry muttered, "Don't do it again, Ron. I'm sorry I reacted so strongly, but...just don't have a go at Hermione."

Red faced and barely in control of his temper, Harry moved to leave the dorm as Ron muttered, "Sure, sorry."

.oOo.

Hermione followed Harry as he stormed out the portrait hole. Catching him out in the passageway, she snatched his arm and spun him about. She didn't even ask him what was wrong, she merely cocked an eyebrow.

"Fonging Ron!" he exclaimed.

Thoroughly confused, she blurted, "What happened?"

Visibly regaining control of his emotions, Harry ground out, "He said some less than flattering things about you, me and the both of us together. I reprimanded him."

Stunned at the implications of his statement, she asked, "What did he say?"

"You don't want to know."

"Yes. I do."

Shrugging, the now mostly-calm Harry replied, "Fine. He called you a tart because you're 'shagging me' and told me that I was too arrogant to hang out with him anymore. There were some more things but you get the idea."

There was a long moment of shocked stillness before Hermione spat, "That foul mouthed loathsome little toad! I'll show him..."

Harry gently caught her elbow before wrapping his arm about her shoulders. "I've come to a realization about Ron." She regarded at him expectantly until he finished, "Ron is thirteen."

Hermione deflated. "Yes, he is. On top of that is Molly's coddling and I suppose that he's really seven or eight emotionally."

Harry shook his head affectionately as Hermione seamlessly came to the same conclusion that he had not so long before.

"He never has been a model for emotional maturity..." she trailed off with a look of hurt and despair. Turning to Harry with a tear in her eye, she asked in a quiet voice, "Do you think we can still be friends with him? Do you think he'll want to be friends with us?"

Harry shrugged and pulled her close. Despite all of Ron's poor behaviour over the years, he was still their friend. Neither Harry nor Hermione had the luxury of discarding friends, so this apparent loss of Ron in their lives was painful.

"Come on, let's get some lunch." Hermione nodded at his idea and they slowly made their way to the Great Hall, arm in arm.

.o0o.

"Transfiguration after lunch?"

Hermione nodded. Knowing that she was grieving the whole situation with Ron, he held his tongue. She was an introvert and had to make sense of the situation in her mind before she could emotionally digest and accept the situation. It was why she had such

a hard time making friends. Finally, she sighed and leaned into her husband's side.

"Crap," she muttered.

Wrapping his arm about her shoulders, he risked a quick peck on the crown of her head. Whispering into her ear he affirmed the truth of his whole existence, "It'll be Ok. We've got each other; in the end, that's all that matters."

She sniffed before nodding and burrowing a little more into his arm.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for a disgusting public display of affection," a hated voice hissed from behind them.

Harry stiffened. He was about to rise, spin and attack the disgusting man, but Hermione's tight grip on the front of his robes kept him seated.

"It will be further ten points if you don't move at least twelve inches apart. Now."

His muscles taut with tension, Harry slowly removed his arm from Hermione's shoulders and scooted away from her on the bench. Breathing deeply, he bent over his plate and waited for the Potions master to leave. After ten full seconds of silence, Harry heard the clop-clop of Snape's boots as he walked away.

Through gritted teeth, Harry murmured, "I fucking hate him."

Hermione didn't even reprove him, just rubbed his thigh under the table. They choked down the balance of their lunch before fleeing the hall for the fourth floor and Transfiguration.

They were the first in the door and found Minerva at her desk reviewing a series of reports. Seeing her favourite students ambling in the room, she set the parchment aside. "I usually enjoy being the Deputy Headmistress. However," she paused and scowled at the pile of reports on her desk, "Right now isn't one of them. I really could care less about the request for another sixty acres to be cleared for pasture."

Apparently Hogwarts was a fully self-sufficient school. There was a whole staff who worked the farming side of the effort. Fields of grain, corn, beans of all shapes and sizes and, of course, potatoes. There was also a livestock aspect of the operation which raised the cattle, chickens and sheep that eventually made themselves to the tables of the Great Hall.

"As Deputy, I am responsible for the management of 'The Farm' as we call it."

With a smile, Harry asked, "I gather the task isn't to your liking?"

A scowl was her only reply.

"Joking aside," Hermione began, "There's a problem in Ravenclaw." She explained about Luna and how they'd talked to Roger Davies. "I think that Roger will take care of the problem, but if you'd talk to Filius, we'd feel a lot better about it."

Her mouth set in a grim line, the Scot murmured, "Oh, I shall."

After a moment, Minerva's scowl melted to a tentative expression. Finally, she asked, "How are you two doing?"

Harry shrugged before looking to Hermione. She answered for them, "Some good and some not so good." She laughed softly, "Courses are beyond easy. Social issues are less easy."

"Mr Weasley," Minerva stated.

"And Snape," Harry growled.

Nodding, Minerva observed, "Mr Weasley's a young lad. You two are far different and even before everything changed," she looked at them significantly, "You two have been always far more mature than your peers."

"As far as Severus is concerned, has he done anything that would be considered inappropriate?"

Harry stared at her in disbelief. "His entire existence is inappropriate."

She stared at The Boy-Who-Lived, not amused.

"What my frustrated husband is attempting to tell you, is that Professor Snape consistently bullies his students, insults them and is a general lout. Other than unprofessional conduct, no, he hasn't done anything inappropriate."

With one last glare at Harry, Minerva turned to Hermione. "When he displays unprofessional conduct in his class again, document it and have as many of your peers sign the description to testify to the truthfulness of your description. We'll have to build a case against him as Albus believes the man can do no wrong."

After a long pause, Minerva's face fell as a further realization formed in her mind, "Or he doesn't care what Severus does wrong."

Since Harry and Hermione had come to her a few nights previous to disclosed their secret, Minerva's opinion of Albus Dumbledore had plummeted. Immediately, she had been disappointed, but the more she reflected on the man's behaviour, the more disillusioned she became about the Headmaster. Her personal regrets for allowing Albus to run roughshod over her own concerns about the Dursleys fitness for Harry's guardianship headed the list of situations her new perspective on Albus Dumbledore had caused her to re-evaluate.

The Potters nodded in sad agreement as the door opened to admit Neville, Parvati and Lavender. Taking the unspoken cue, the three warriors sat at their respective desks and assumed their professional mien.

Class was...painful. Dreadfully bored, Harry had to struggle to keep awake while Hermione flipped through the textbook, looking for something – anything – that would hold her interest.

She was unsuccessful.

"Mr Potter, Miss Granger, stay behind."

After the classroom emptied, Minerva cast a Silencing charm. "I noticed that the topic failed to consume you."

In addition to their very personal relationship with Minerva, both Potters respected her greatly as a teacher. Hermione blushed and stammered a response while Harry looked at his shoes.

A dry chuckle preceded her question, "I was wondering if you'd like to work on the Animagus transformation this year?"

Her eyes wide, Hermione asked, "Really?" At Minerva's short nod, Hermione gushed, "We'd love it!"

"Good." Reaching into her desk, she produced a thick tome, "Read this, then come back. You can read it in class if you like, just cast an illusion to hide your activities from your peers. I shan't call on you in class."

With a wide smile, Harry said, "Thanks, Min."

An uncharacteristic smile graced the Head of Gryffindor house. "It's my pleasure, Harry."

.oOo.

Charms, too, was deadly dull. "How are we going to survive?" Harry asked as they all filed out. Ron had sat as far away from Harry and Hermione as he could and still be in the classroom.

Hermione shrugged before murmuring, "Talk to Min?"

As Harry nodded in assent, he froze. Walking toward them was Remus Lupin.

"Fuck me running," Harry murmured. Hermione was so taken aback that she didn't reprove his profanity.

Looking his usual post-full moon pasty and weak, Remus wended his way through the throng of third years, smiling and greeting them as he passed.

Tears sprang to the Potters' eyes. Remus had been the first of Harry's 'family' to return. Sirius was next and then later, he'd added Minerva and, of course, Hermione. But Remus had been the first.

One of the gentlest men that either Harry or Hermione had ever met, they found out later that he'd been slaughtered like a hog and fed to his fellow weres on a full moon in late 2000. Mad Eye had told them that his wife, Tonks, had been raped to death in front of Moony before Walden Macnair had accomplished his dirty work. It is said that only silver can kill a werewolf, but that is a misnomer. So too can dismemberment. And the Killing curse. But that's another discussion for another day.

Here was Remus Lupin slowly moving down the hallway toward our heroes. When the current Defence Professor noticed Harry standing along the wall, his amber eyes zeroed in on his pseudo-nephew. The Boy-Who-Lived caught his breath. As an ickle thirdster, he'd never picked up on the subtle cues from Remus that he knew Harry, much less that he'd been 'Unka Mooey'.

Yet here was their Defence Professor approaching with an expression of tenderness and affection that was plain to those with eyes to see.

Remus nodded his head to the Potters before greeting them, "Harry, Hermione. How are you this fine day?"

"We're well, Professor," Hermione choked out. Harry could tell by her tone that she too was overcome by emotion.

A tad bemused, Lupin looked back and forth between his third year students with a small smile playing across his features. Latching onto Harry's gaze once more, he bid them farewell before moving on down the hall.

Harry sagged against the wall, Hermione sagging onto him in turn. "I need a drink," he muttered.

"Me too. Come on, let's get our homework done before dinner. We need to go to Gringotts tonight."

He nodded wearily, emotionally wrung out and tired, he trudged after his wife to Gryffindor Tower.

.oOo.

Homework took a grand total of seventeen minutes followed by a ten minute supper in the Great Hall. Neither had the emotional reserves to engage any of their 'peers' in discussion, so they fed the monster within before heading to the humpbacked witch passageway on the third floor.

A quick "Dissendium" caused the hump of the witch to open wide. Harry bowed and snootily intoned, "After you, milady."

Giggling, Hermione curtsied while fanning herself with a conjured hand fan, "Why thank you, milord."

Cackling, they climbed in the hole and slipped down the short slide. Following the twists and turns of the secret passage, they made their way out from the famous Hogwarts anti-Apparition wards. Hermione illuminated her wand so that both she and Harry could inspect the inside of the passageway minutely. "If we're going to Apparate back to this spot, we should know it pretty well," she'd reasoned.

They cast illusions over their features and with a quick double pop-pop and they were gone.

.oOo.

The wards funnelled the Potters to the corral looking area that was the Apparition centre for Diagon Alley. Harry was surprised to see three red-robed Aurors standing watch at the only non-warded site for the Alley. Heads bowed under the hoods of their cloaks, the teens scurried into the darkening shopping district.

"What's with the Aurors?" Harry asked.

"Sirius," she replied.

Rolling his eyes at his lapse, Harry pushed on to the bank. It was time to assert control over the Potter finances.

Although Gringotts is a bank and therefore closes its doors promptly at five PM, its larger depositors have access to the Goblins at any time.

After hammering on the door of the bank for a minute, a small slide opened and a Goblin peered out at Harry. "What do you want?" he snarled.

"I'm Harry Potter, open up. I need to see my account manager."

"Oooo, the bleedin' Boy-Who-Lived needs in the bank..." the Goblin mocked.

With a grin that was more feral than friendly, Harry snarked back, "Open the damn door before I roast your entrails as an appetizer."

The Goblin blinked and barked a laugh before sliding the peephole closed. A quick moment later, the door opened. "Get in here, you walking roast."

Hermione chuckled under her breath, "Directness always pays with Goblins."

The door warden led the Potters into the office section of Gringotts. After five minutes and over eight different hallways (by Hermione's count), they pulled up in front of a non-descript door. "Snagrat's in here," the door warden blurted before turning on his heel and walking away.

After a deep calming breath, Harry opened the door, allowing Hermione to precede him. Inside, they found a middle aged Goblin, the thick tufts of hair sprouting from his ears just beginning to grey.

Without looking up from his desk, Snagrat barked, "What?"

"I'm Harry Potter and I want to talk about my money."

Looking up from the parchment in his hands, Snagrat peered at the teen. His eyes cutting to Hermione, he again barked, "Who's she?"

"My wife."

Now Snagrat's thick furry eyebrows shot up in surprise. Leaning back in his chair, he motioned to two empty chairs across his desk, "Really? Have a seat Mr and Mrs Potter."

Delving straight into business – directness is valued by the Goblins after all – Harry began, "We are here for me to assert control over the Potter Trust and all other fiduciary holdings, as well as, add my wife to said accounts."

The Goblin nodded thoughtfully while scrutinizing Harry and Hermione. After a long pause, he finally told them, "You are not of age. Your legal guardian has not designated you in writing to assert control over your inheritance, so I cannot facilitate your request." Turning to Hermione he scanned her again before adding, "But we can add your...wife...to your trust fund account."

Dreading the answer, Harry asked, "Who do you have on record as my legal guardian?"

Without hesitation, Snagrat replied, "Sirius Black. Since he is imprisoned, or rather was imprisoned and now a fugitive, the title has temporarily devolved to Albus Dumbledore."

"Fong," Harry muttered. "At least it's not the Dursleys."

"Snagrat," Hermione began, "What is the source of those choices of guardian?"

"James Potter's will, of course."

"But..." Harry was thoroughly confused now. Why had he been able to gain control over his finances 'before' and he couldn't now?

He stopped as Hermione muttered to him, "Last time, you'd completed your O.W.L.s and both of them were dead. That's why you got control."

Thinking hard, Harry asked, "Are the accounts monitored for activity?"

A slight grin graced the taciturn Goblin, "Any transaction under one thousand galleons does not require a notice to your guardian."

Obviously, Snagrat was going to make Harry work for his answers. Hermione continued the line of thought, "And how many nine hundred and ninety nine galleon transactions can take place within a specified period of time before my husband's guardian is notified?"

The grin blossomed into a smirk, "There is no stipulation along those lines."

Nodding, Hermione followed up, "The current account balance?"

"Fifty thousand galleons. It is refilled from the primary Potter vaults every six months."

"Hmmm," Hermione temporized. Finally, she smiled, "Snagrat, may my husband assert reporting requirements over the Potter accounts and holdings as well?"

When Snagrat barked a laugh, she smiled in return, "Say, for any withdrawal not made by myself or my husband?"

Snagrat looked to Harry who merely nodded in concurrence. "It shall be done."

"One last thing," Hermione mentioned, "We would like a complete accounting and report of the activity of the Potter estate since the death of James and Lily Potter."

Glaring at Hermione, Snagrat barked, "Fifty Galleons and four weeks."

Harry stood, "Thank you for your help, Snagrat. We'll show ourselves out."

.oOo.

"Well, that was less than helpful." Harry grumbled on the way out of the bank.

"Yes and no," Hermione countered. "We'll know if Albus is helping himself to our money and if we really want to, we can siphon just short of a thousand every few days into offshore accounts."

"And if we find out Dumbledore is stealing from us?"

Chewing her lip, Hermione thought for a minute. Finally, she explained, "I don't think he's doing that." When Harry scowled, she continued, "Look, he's a cold hearted bastard who has no

compunction ruining the lives around him if he feels it's necessary, but he's not a thief." She paused, considering her statement. "I think."

Harry shrugged, but remained quiet. Deep down, he knew she was right, but didn't want to admit it. He'd wanted to try and gain a level of control over his life in just this one way. It was something that frustrated him to no end. Harry always had felt that he never had any control over his life, that forces pushed him this way and that, never letting him strike out on his own: Voldemort, Dumbledore, Dursleys, wizarding public as a whole, all of them pushed, prodded or drove him in ways that he'd rather not go.

"Fong," Harry muttered. She wrapped her arm around his waist as they meandered through the late night crowds, slowly heading toward the Apparition point.

.oOo.

"I am not looking forward to this lesson," Harry murmured as they entered the Potions classroom.

Setting her books on the worktable, Hermione agreed, "Neither am I." Setting her satchel on the floor, leaning against the table's leg, she added, "For God's sake, don't look him in the eye."

Harry rolled his eyes, only to be punched in the arm by his wife. "Ow, that hurt."

She huffed in humorous annoyance as she prepared her parchment for note taking.

Bang!

The door slammed shut as Snape strode in the classroom, his sneer more pronounced than usual. "Be careful, it'll stick that way," Harry whispered.

Her eyes widened just a tad as Hermione ruthlessly suppressed her laughter.

"Potter! Ten points from Gryffindor for disrupting my class."

Red-faced, Harry stared at the table top. Hermione's hand on his thigh was the only thing that kept him in his seat.

"I was talking to you, Potter. Look at me!"

Slowly, Harry raised his face to the sallow faced goad. Somehow, he had the presence of mind to avoid Snape's gaze. Struggling with his fury, Harry concentrated on a spot just over the man's shoulder.

"Pitiful," Snape spat as he moved to the front of the classroom.

Harry's head jerked back down to the table with an appearance of calm, but he was literally vibrating with rage. The only reason the Shrinking Solution he and Hermione were working on wasn't a cauldron full of boiled shit was because Hermione did everything, Harry was only capable of going through the motions.

By the end of the lesson, Harry had almost lost control three separate times. Snape had continued his persecution of The Boy-Who-Lived to the point where even some of the Slytherins were frowning. Daphne Greengrass and Blaise Zabini, in particular, watched Harry's torment with expressions approaching disapprobation.

As Harry and Hermione exited the classroom, Harry felt a hand gently grasp his shoulder. Turning swiftly, Harry had to forcibly quash the urge to attack when he recognized Neville Longbottom.

"Are you alright, Harry?"

Letting a shaky breath leak out between his teeth, Harry shrugged. The three Gryffindors silently wound out of the dungeons. When they were finally alone, Neville spoke, "He was completely out of order, Harry. You didn't deserve that, you're the best person I know."

Nonplussed, Harry stared at his friend. This was the Neville of late fifth year. This was the kind young man who stood up for his friends and began to break out of his shy shell. What had changed?

Hermione added, "I agree Neville."

Touched, Harry nodded jerkily. "Thanks, guys. It...it means a lot for you to say those things. Thanks."

With a faint smile, Neville added, "Sure thing, mate."

"Neville," Hermione began, "I'm going to write a summary of the lesson and Professor Snape's bad behaviour. Would you be willing to sign it to attest to its truthfulness?"

Knowing exactly what Hermione was doing, Neville considered her for a long minute. Finally, he nodded and told her, "Sure thing, Hermione. I'll even try to help you convince our classmates to sign it as well."

Now it was Hermione's turn to be surprised, "Thanks, Neville."

.oOo.

It was late as Harry and Hermione sat on the steps of the castle. There were ten minutes until curfew and the two wanted to stretch out their time alone until the last minute. Harry also had his cloak, but they didn't want to arouse the Headmaster's suspicion just yet by prowling about after hours.

"Are we going to tell them" she whispered.

"Neville and Luna?" he asked.

Her nod was sad, for she knew the answer already. "We can't," he admitted for them both. Nodding, she curled into his arms. Their task seemed even more difficult this evening that it had the first day back.

They only had themselves and Minerva as allies in the know; they'd never felt so isolated in their life. The other Gryffindors were already noticing how different Harry and Hermione had been acting. Ron was making fast friends with Dean and Seamus. It looked like their friendship with the youngest Weasley male was well and truly dead.

"I thought everything would be wonderful if I got back," he breathed. "I've got you," he affectionately squeezed the witch in his arms, "And in the end, that's all that really matters. But..." he trailed off.

Hermione stood before pulling Harry to his feet. Instinctively, they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower. "But it's still pretty lonely," she finished for him, as if there had been no interruption.

"Yeah."

"You've Quidditch practise tomorrow," she supplied.

Smiling, Harry nodded. "I do indeed. Thank God for that."

"I know you missed it," she observed.

"I did, indeed." Pinching her bum, he teased, "Not as much as you, though."

In a flash, she had him pinned to the wall. Kissing him fiercely, she pressed her pubescent body to his. After a moment, Harry's mind caught up to her body and reciprocated in kind.

This wasn't about love; it was about pain and finding solace in each other. Even if it was only a temporary reprieve. They trusted each other completely with their bodies, minds and souls. A bit of snogging never hurt anyone.

Breaking off the kiss, Hermione panted, "Thanks, I needed that."

His crooked smile firmly in place, he kissed her neck before muttering, "Anytime, my love."

"Come on, we're going to be late."

Grey eyes watched the young couple move hand in hand down the hallway before turning toward the grounds and loping into the forest.

.oOo.

"Ah, crap," Harry muttered as they entered Defence class.

"Hmmm?" Hermione murmured from her seat next to him.

"Boggart today."

"Oh." The problem immediately bloomed fully formed in her mind. Any of the many scenes of death and destruction from the war could show up. Or worse, one of the many times Harry had been wounded. Or...

Turning to Harry, she saw his despairing gaze focused on her. She knew exactly what Harry's Boggart would be. Not a dead Sirius, not a Dementor, not even a mutilated Ron. It would be her corpse as it had been on the evening of November 22, 2006. Blindly grasping his hand, she murmured, "I'm here. I'm never leaving you again."

A miniscule tear tracked down his left cheek, "What if you can't help it?"

She bolted from her seat, dragging him out of the classroom to surprised glances from the other students who were also early. Not caring about what any others were thinking, she pulled Harry into a broom closet. Holding him tight, the emotions burst from both of them as they wept without restraint.

Neither noticed when the door silently opened. Nor did they notice the man watching them with a concerned expression on his scarred face. "Harry, Hermione, are you well?"

Breaking apart, they hastily wiped their faces. Sniffling back tears, Harry murmured, "I'm fine, Moony. Just give us a minute."

Hermione froze. A heartbeat later, so too did Harry. Slowly turning to face their Defence Professor, they saw a white faced Remus Lupin. "W-what did you just call me?" he rasped.

"Er, sorry, sir. I'm just a bit worked up," he stammered. "A bit of bad news from home."

Staring at Harry as if seeing him for the first time, Remus had the beginning of a smile lurking about the corners of his mouth. "No. You called me Moony."

Wrong footed, awash with emotion from a variety of sources, Harry and Hermione could only gape. A gentle expression crossed Remus' face, "We can talk about this after class, eh Pronglet?"

.oOo.

"Fong, fong, fong..." Harry had been muttering under his breath for the last five minutes and his litany hadn't changed a bit.

At the end of her patience, Hermione viciously jabbed him in the side with her finger. "Enough."

Letting a shaky breath wander out, Harry nodded and got control of himself. "Thanks," he muttered to her.

All the while, Remus had been lecturing on Boggarts and the spell to drive them away. Finally, he instructed the students to form a line to combat the magical creature.

Neville encountered Boggart-Snape again. Once again, at the cry of "Riddikulus!" by the Longbottom scion, the class rollicked with laughter as the Boggart-Snape suddenly was wearing clothes of the style Lady Augusta Longbottom preferred.

The Boggart became a mummy, a banshee, a rat, a rattlesnake, a bloody eyeball, a severed hand and a spider followed by Remus' intervention. Once again, it settled on the full moon. After Banishing the creature back to its wardrobe, Lupin jovially dismissed the class, with a significant glance at Harry and Hermione.

Loitering under the pretence of repacking Hermione's bag, the time travellers were the last students in the classroom.

With an inviting smile and inquisitive expression, Remus indicated his office off the classroom, "Shall we?"

Resignedly, Harry nodded. As he followed Remus up the stairs, Hermione whispered, "Maybe this is for the best."

Acknowledging her, he nodded. They settled into three chairs in round robin fashion when Remus offered, "I'd suggest tea, but you two seem far too nervous for that."

When they weakly returned his smile, he leaned back in his chair, doing everything he could to make the students as comfortable as he could. It was obvious they were very stressed about something. He was stunned when Harry drew his wand and immobilized the two paintings in the office.

Remus was further confused when Harry looked to Hermione and asked, "Vow?"

She considered before turning to Remus and asking, "How susceptible to Legilimancy are you considering your Lycanthropy?"

That was question was on a very short list of the most unexpected questions he'd ever consider hearing from his pseudo nephew and his best friend. Flummoxed, he croaked, "What?"

Sighing, Harry explained a bit, "I know about the Marauders and how they got their nicknames." With an expression of tender understanding, he continued, "And I know why they got their nicknames as well. Because they loved their brother."

Completely nonplussed, Remus merely stared at the two teens.

Tentatively, Hermione told him, "We have secrets. Dumbledore and Snape have no compunction using Legilimancy to scan a person's mind. Given your history with Snape in especial, we need to know about your ability to defend your mind, and by extension, our secrets."

Blinking, Remus nodded. Regaining his composure, he explained, "The Spirit of the Wolf defends my mind, any Legilimancer's mind would be ripped to shreds if he tried to assault me."

Harry sighed, exchanged a glance with Hermione before saying, "I trust you Moony. I trust you with my life, but at the same time, you owe Dumbledore. The old man isn't afraid to call in that debt if he feels he needs something. We'll need an Unbreakable Vow that you'll never disclose our secrets."

Remus blinked. After a moment, he questioned, "Your secrets are that important?"

"Life and death," Harry replied in a solemn tone.

Pursing his lips, Remus considered. Unbreakable Vows were not to be taken lightly. At the same time, he wanted to be of use to Harry. After the little scene in the broom closet, it was obvious that Harry and Hermione were in need of help. If he could be of service to his deceased friends' son, then he had to make himself available. At the same time, this wasn't about James and Lily. It was about Harry; the boy who he'd not seen in a dozen years. The boy whom he'd loved as a toddler, who he wanted to love again as a young man.

Deciding, he told them, "I'll Vow to never willingly disclose your secrets. Veritaserum can overcome anything, though. I'll only willingly discuss your secrets with you or anyone else in the know."

Nodding his head, Harry agreed. Ten seconds later, the Vow had been made with Hermione as their binder.

"Where to start?" Harry murmured.

Hermione interrupted Harry by beginning the explanation. "We have the memories of our twenty seven year old selves. We know what is going to happen and how. For example, this year, we all find out that Sirius is innocent and Peter was the betrayer. Next year, Peter will be instrumental in the resurrection of Voldemort. After that, the reign of terror from the seventies will be revisited tenfold."

"A thousand fold," Harry added, his eyes staring far away.

Completely taken aback once again, Remus repeated, "Sirius is innocent?"

Nodding with a sad smile, Hermione added, "And will soon be living in the Shack."

Leaning forward, Remus took his head in his hands and wept. He wept for Sirius, whom he'd long hated. He wept for Peter, the poor stupid boy he'd been to be so led astray. He wept for James, Lily and Harry; the family which had been rent asunder. He wept for himself and all the sorrow and grief he'd experienced alone over the last decade.

Feeling a hand on his shoulder, Remus looked up to find Harry and Hermione kneeling in front of him with their arms looped around his shoulders in a gentle embrace. "I'm sorry, Moony. I'm sorry you've suffered."

Shaking away his tears, Remus embraced them both. His new family. "What else?" he asked.

They all resettled in their seats, wiping eyes and blowing noses for a moment. Hermione chewed her lip as she considered Remus' question. Turning to her husband, she shrugged. Harry replied for

them both, "Nothing else is really important right now. Our goal is to destroy Voldemort once and for all during the resurrection ceremony next year. Everything after that should just be bad memories for us."

Nodding his head in understanding, Remus asked, "How can I help?"

.oOo.

Hermione trailed Harry down to the Quidditch pitch. He had his trusty Nimbus 2000 slung over his shoulder and nearly bounced into the changing rooms with Katie and the Twins.

Climbing the stands, she unslung her satchel. Conjuring a lap desk, she set about wrapping up her homework for the next few weeks. Smiling she realized that she had every intention of allowing Harry to copy her homework. It's not that he didn't know the material; he just had much better things to do with his time. Like her.

Sighing, she admitted that she and Harry needed some private time and soon. Surprisingly, her early teenage body was more than capable of keeping up with her mature libido. Based on Harry's comments, gropes and searing kisses, so too was his body.

Sex was something that she'd never really given much thought towards. Until their first time they'd been together, that is. In retrospect, it had been uncoordinated, painful and completely wonderful. She had made love with the love of her life. There's no score, award or other measure except that of love and make no mistake, she loved Harry Potter. With all off her heart and soul. He owned her by her own surrender, and she, in turn, owned him.

An hour after the team entered the changing rooms, they exited en masse. As they shot into the skies, she had to grin as Harry looped and barrel rolled across the pitch, shouting to the heavens. Where Hermione found her solace in books, Harry found his in the skies. It had been far too long for him to be on a broom. Nearly a decade as a matter of fact.

She couldn't help but admire Oliver Wood's single mindedness and devotion to Quidditch. In her heart, she recognized a fellow devotee. Where she devoted herself to learning and academic pursuits, she saw Oliver devoting himself to the sport of Quidditch. Now that she

was a few years older, she could admit – to herself at least – that there was nothing ignoble about pursuing a career in Quidditch.

Wondering if Harry would ever want to pursue a professional career in the sport, her mind was undecided. He certainly had the talent and enthusiasm for it. At the same time, with Harry's extraordinary disdain for attention, the combination of being The Boy-Who-Lived and a Quidditch star might just quash the idea before it bloomed. They'd have to discuss it.

Despite all the gloom and darkness that overshadowed their lives due to the curse of Voldemort, they had another chance to live. Truly live their lives and it wasn't to be squandered. So, she'd talk to her husband about a Quidditch career.

Shouts and other horseplay refocused her attention on the players. Fred and George in specific. Hermione stifled a laugh at the Twins' capers. They were currently teasing Harry about dating Hermione and she had to admit they were quite funny. They weren't saying anything malicious, just embarrassing. She could tell that Harry was forcing a stern expression but really wanted to laugh. Ducking a bludger, he finally let go a deep belly laugh.

"Finally, a bit of levity," she exhaled.

High on the bleachers, a large black dog silently watched the practice.

.oOo.

"We need the map," Harry proclaimed the next day as he watched the Twins enter the common room.

Hermione nodded in agreement. "I agree. Earlier, when we were talking to Moony, I was about to ask you for it when I remembered that you don't have it yet."

"I'm about to get it right now. Want to help?"

"Sure," she shrugged before placing her book in her satchel.

Harry called after the twins, "Oi, lads. Let's have a bit of a talk."

"Sure, mate. Where?"

With the ghost of a smile, Harry told Fred, "Follow us and learn."

George snorted before snarking, 'Oh, yes. Show us and teach us oh wise one."

Harry smiled at Hermione, who returned it with a mischievous grin of her own. Dashing through the first secret passageway (just to the right out of the Fat Lady), they wound up to the seventh floor in the dusty passageway.

"How the bloody hell did you find this place?" George asked bewilderedly.

"Oh, I know some people."

"Like who?" Fred asked.

"Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs," Harry replied with a smile.

Floored, Fred and George stopped in front of the Troll tapestry with Barney the Barmy trying to teach the trolls how to dance.

"How do you know them?" George prodded. Both twins' faces were a mixture of confusion, suspicion and awe.

Nonchalantly, Harry shrugged. "My Dad was Prongs."

"No Fucking Way."

"Way," Harry replied with another grin.

Turning to Hermione, Fred told her, "Don't listen to this next part." After her chuckle, Fred turned back to Harry and intoned, "Son of Prongs, we, the Twins Weasley, stand by to be instructed. School us oh Wise One."

Now Harry, Hermione and George were laughing. Wiping his eyes, Harry gestured to the wall, "Lads, I propose a trade: the map for a room that isn't on the map. A room that is extraordinarily...wonderful."

"Done," George replied without a moment's hesitation. Fred dug into his left pocket before producing the very familiar bit of old parchment.

Gently, Harry took it, caressed it once before pocketing it himself. With another smile, he added, "To sweeten the pot, I'll introduce you to Moony."

Fred fainted. George wept.

"I love you Harry," George croaked as he revived his brother.

Shaking his head, Harry asked Hermione, "Room of Lost Things?"

"Sure, why not."

Harry began pacing back and forth in the hallway while Fred and George watched him, bewilderment evident on their faces.

After the third pass, a large oak door appeared. With a flourish, Harry told them, "Gentlemen, after you."

George opened the door, Fred peeking over his brother's shoulder. "What the...?"

"This is the Room of Requirement. If you concentrate on what you need from the Room whilst pacing back and forth in front of the section of wall, it will provide."

"Fuck me running."

"George! Language!"

Without looking at her, he murmured, "Sorry, Hermione."

"Harry, this place is...well it's..." Fred tailed off.

"Yeah, it is." Harry confirmed.

Shaking his head as if in a daze, George turned to The Boy-Who-Lived and asked, "So. Moony?"

A/N

1. I own nothing.

2. Ok, major problems. My laptop has gone kaput so I've lost \approx 6k words of Hippogriff Chapter 12 and \approx 8k words of Harry and Gabi. Muggledad is unhappy. So, while the laptop is in the shop, I'm working on E&B. Did I back up to my desktop? Or the external HD? Of course.

Six weeks ago.

Ooops.

3. Yes, Luna is different than in OOTP. I've always thought that the whole 'spacey Luna' gig was too over the top and made the character into a caricature. Sure, it's a defence mechanism to help her deal with life after her mother died and everything afterwards. H&Hr get to her before she goes too far off the deep end. Her dad's a bit...odd and as you can see in this chapter, she's got a touch of Seer ability going for her.

4. I had a few reviews from Chapter 1 asking about backstory. I'm using canon up until the day after the battle for the Department of Mysteries (with a few additions that will stand out as they crop up). After that, it's all muggledad AU.

5. Recommendation for the chapter is 'Vox Corporis' by MissAnnThropic. It's probably the best written romance fic out there. The Goblin interaction at the Bank door was inspired by Jeconais' most excellent fic, "Happily Ever After".

6. As usual, the status of my stories is updated on Mondays on my FanFiction (dot) net muggledad homepage.

Chapter 3

Crookshanks was curled up in Hermione's lap as she cuddled into Harry's side. It had been a quiet night for the couple as they hung out in the common room with the Quidditch team. Hermione was becoming quite friendly with 'the Girls'. Angelina loved Runes while Alicia and Katie were budding Arithmancers. She was glad to see that brawn didn't always exclude brain for the Chaser line.

It was late, so their friends had drifted off to various activities; homework, prank planning for the Twins, and more Quidditch prep for Oliver. This left Harry and Hermione comfortably alone. Surreptitiously, Harry had opened the Marauders' Map to activate it.

"Looky here. Someone's being a bad puppy," Harry whispered with an amused tone.

Hermione looked at the map and followed Harry's finger to the footprints labelled 'Padfoot'. He was down by the lake and stationary.

"Should we?" he asked.

"Bring him some food and warm clothes?" she replied.

He closed his eyes in gratitude for her cooperation, "Thanks love. Give me a minute to grab my cloak and we'll head to the kitchens."

A teasing smile graced her face as she needled, "Are you a wizard or what?" Drawing her wand from a recently purchased wrist holster, she gave a slight flick. First her cloak zoomed down the steps from the girls' dormitory, followed shortly by Harry's from the boys' dorm.

Hanging his head, he asked, "I'm never going to live that down, am I?"

Smiling, she kissed his cheek, "Nope."

Wrapping her cloak across her shoulders, he gave her a playful nudge, "Come on, let's get to the kitchens."

Ten minutes later they had a basket of food on top of which was two thick wool blankets. "We'll get his measurements to owl order him some outdoor type clothes." Hermione seemed just as excited to

see Sirius as Harry was. He smiled at her eagerness, grateful for her positive attitude.

They poured out the front gate of the castle and were nearly running toward the lake, when Hermione abruptly called, "Harry, wait."

Confused, he turned to her expectantly. "We shouldn't do this," she groaned.

A flash of anger crossed his face before he reined it in. "What do you mean?"

Moving to a massive tree stump, she sat with a dispirited sigh. "We have no explanation for how we know Sirius, much less knowing that he's innocent. Based on all your 'before' knowledge, you should hate him, not be bringing him food and clothing. He'd know something was up if we find him tonight and we're all happy to see him and such."

Harry visibly deflated, "Fong." Moving to her side, he sat on the other half of the stump.

The Smartest Witch of the Age frowned slightly, but ploughed on. "We can get this stuff to Moony. He, in turn, can get it to Sirius. After that, we have an excuse as Remus will have 'told us the truth' and we can approach Padfoot with our cover intact."

Nodding in agreement, Harry sighed before he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. Slowly, they stood to make their way to the castle.

The Grim in the shadows watched them for a long moment, before settling down to wait for his surviving best friend to come out of the castle. He had quite a few questions for Moony.

.oOo.

"He's on the grounds?" Remus asked with an odd mixture of excitement and trepidation.

Harry pulled the map out of his pocket and after a moment's hesitation, handed it to Remus. "Would you like to do the honours?"

A sad smile crossed Moony's face as he drew his wand, tapped the Map and whispered, "I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

For some peculiar reason, it was a moment of great import for all in the room. Moony was activating The Map to find Padfoot. The ghosts of Hogwarts past swirled about them. Quickly scanning the Map, Remus nodded to himself, "He's outside the main doors under that little stand of hemlock trees."

Shrinking the food and blankets, he stuffed them in his pocket. "Head back to the Tower, I don't know how long I'll be. If I don't fetch you before curfew, we'll catch up after breakfast."

Harry nodded as he helped Hermione to her feet. "We need to find a safe hideout for him," Hermione mused aloud.

"Not Black Manor," Harry declared.

"He went there?" Remus asked in a shocked voice.

"Yep. Dumbledore insisted. Said the wards were the best he could find. Being there damn near drove Padfoot completely round the twist, too. He'll not go back there." Harry's face was drawn as he spoke, but his jaw set in an expression all too familiar to Hermione. He wasn't changing his mind on this one.

As the threesome moved down the empty hall, Remus muttered, "What about Rowan Hill?"

Not understanding the reference, Harry asked, "What's a Rowan Hill?"

Now Remus was confused, "You've never been to the Potter ancestral home?"

"Obviously not."

"We'll figure this out tomorrow, too. For now, know that it's your family's home on the coast of Cardigan Bay in Wales. The head of the family has always lived there going back to the time of the court of Camelot."

At the next intersection, the Potters headed off to Gryffindor Tower while Remus headed to the entrance hall and from there, the Lawn of Hogwarts.

"Do you think it'll be ok?" Hermione asked. When Harry gave her a questioning look, she continued, "With Padfoot and Moony?"

Harry gave a cynical snort. "I'm sure Padfoot will kick the fong out of Moony for not believing in his innocence before giving him the biggest hug Moony's ever received."

A faint smile crossed her face, "I do believe you're right."

.oOo.

The next morning at breakfast, Harry and Hermione were first in the Great Hall. Remus hadn't come to them by midnight, so they hurried to the Great Hall, hoping he'd come early.

Books spread in front of them they made a convincing show of reading ahead for their courses. No one caught on to the fact that the four books spread were magical copies of Minerva's animagus transformation book.

"Love, did you get this part on page one seventy three?" Harry asked in a distracted undertone.

Flipping back a few pages, Hermione asked in turn, "The part about instincts and possible conflicts?"

"Yeah."

"Well, the way I understand it is..." she broke off as Remus Lupin limped into the hall.

A small smirk crossed Harry's face as he mentally paid himself five pounds for the bet he'd made with himself the previous night. Padfoot had laid a wallop on Moony that lasted until morning.

The grim expression on Remus' face drove off all humour though. Without preamble, he asked them, "Are you two done?"

When they nodded, he motioned to them, "Let's go, we've quite a bit to discuss." He spun on his heel, making his way out of the Great Hall at a quick clip.

Scrambling to pack their satchels, Harry and Hermione eventually made their way to the Defence Professor's office. While Harry froze the portraits in the room, Remus cast a Privacy ward that surprised Hermione. It not only prevented magical or mundane eavesdropping, but also stunned a person who came within fifteen feet of the ward line.

"Sirius knows," Remus declared with a solemn expression.

"Oh, shit," Harry groaned. Dropping into a chair, he briskly ran his hands through his hair.

A bit more demurely, Hermione sat next to her husband, "To be clear, what exactly does Sirius know?"

"He knows that you've time travelled in some way. He knows that you're playing a part here. He knows that you know he's innocent. He knows that I'm under an Unbreakable Vow not to reveal your secrets."

"Well." Hermione began before trailing off weakly. "Well, I guess that changes things." She looked to Harry and shrugged. It seemed that all their plans were being torn to ribbons.

"I also saw something on the Map," Remus growled.

"Fuck!" Harry griped. "Did you kill him?"

"Not yet. I'm going to get him right now, though."

"Look," Harry placated "Let me go get Peter. It will be a lot less conspicuous for me to go to the third year boys' dormitory than you. I'll bring him back here and we can talk."

"But what about...?" Hermione asked.

"If we decide to let him go, we'll Memory charm him to hell and back." Harry stood to leave. Remembering, he said to Hermione, "Could you fetch Minerva?" To Remus he asked, "And could you go

fetch our wayward stray? I think a council of war is needed now. I'm completely at sea with this."

The threesome dispersed on their assigned errands, worry stamped on each face.

.oOo.

Minerva McGonagall had just made one of the more difficult decisions of her life. She had decided to break with Albus Dumbledore and his leadership. 'Blindly following' would be too strong a characterization for her behaviour over the last forty or so years.

"But bloody close," she muttered to herself.

Always considering herself an independent woman, Minerva was heartily ashamed of her lapdog like following of the Headmaster. Her father had been a farmer and a Highlander to boot. Life had never been easy on their small farm fifty miles northwest of Inverness. From sunup to sundown, Ian Fraser had worked the land. Magic had helped, but the fields weren't very fruitful, so every harvest had been hard won. He had taught his daughters through words and deeds to be independent. 'Always form your own opinions; never allow another to tell you how to think,' had been his message.

A twofold assignment, Minerva and her sister Venus had the responsibility for tending the family's small herd of Angora goats. Milking twice a day, shearing in the spring followed by washing and spinning the wool. It taught them responsibility and it also taught them to be aware of their charges. Ian and Jenny Fraser never checked on the goats. They were for the girls to mind. Lessons like that had formed and built the foundation of the woman she became.

She didn't find out until her father died, but he had saved every galleon he could to put toward his daughters' education. He was not an erudite man, but he loved his family in his stoic way.

To say that she had loved her father fell far short of her true emotion. Respected, venerated and even revered at times, Ian Fraser was as close to a deity as Minerva allowed in her life. Ian had died far too young.

It was a freak accident. He was mending a fence line on a clear sunny day when a bolt of lightning killed him. Jamie McGonagall had been her rock during her grief. They'd always been playmates and later classmates when they started Hogwarts together. She fell in love with him as he showed the side of himself that cradled, protected and loved her when she was unable to care for herself. Binding her so tightly to him with his love, care and support, it completely devastated Minerva when the Death Eaters had called on their home late one evening. A Decapitation curse made Minerva a widow at the age of twenty three.

She was catatonic for nearly a month. The house elves fed her as if she were a new born. Solly and Maeve cleaned up their mistress' mess, kept the house and did the shopping.

When Albus Dumbledore called, he had to use magic to bring her 'round. She didn't respond to any stimuli until Albus leveraged his immense magical strength to cast the strongest Cheering charm many had ever seen. He wasn't a truly bad man; Minerva liked to believe that he really did care for her well being. Common sense told her that there are very few people on the planet who are truly evil. Despite his actions, she didn't believe him to be one of those few. Voldemort on the other hand...

Nevertheless, Albus lifted her up to allow her to stand once more. He gave her an outlet for her grief and activity for her mind. Truly, he had saved her life. She was under no illusions regarding how long she would have lasted otherwise. Wasting away or suicide was just around the corner for her.

"It's most likely possible, that Albus had taken Father's place," she murmured to herself, late the night before. "And I transferred a child's unblinking devotion from her father to a father-like person. Father had his flaws – a quick temper being the most glaring – but he was a beacon for me in my childhood." Her head bowed, she admitted, "Yes, I put Albus in the same place. I made him my beacon when I shouldn't have."

The most shameful aspect of the situation for her was that she had done it of her own free will. This was not her father nor yet the love of her life. He was her supervisor. No more, and no less.

Oh, there were extenuating circumstances, she was well aware of that ugly fact. Her father had died unexpectedly. Her husband had been savagely murdered. In the end, though, she had blindly followed a man to the near ruin of many lives. If Harry and Hermione's experience of what was to come occurred, it would be to the ruin of millions of lives. She never seriously challenged or questioned him. She never exerted herself when her gut screamed that she was in the right.

That night in Surrey, her instincts were roaring to take the Potter boy far from the disgusting people in the home at 4 Privet Drive.

Yet, she did not. She followed the soothing, honeyed words of Albus Dumbledore.

Benjy Fenwick. Edgar Bones. James Potter. Lily Potter. Gideon Prewitt. Fabian Prewitt. The list went on ad infinitum.

Never again.

And so she wept.

She wept for herself and her lost father from so many years before. She wept for baby Harry who'd lost his parents. She wept for the Harry of today who'd lost everyone because of the poor leadership and guidance of an old man. She wept for Albus, because he would never admit nor see his flaws.

It was a long night for Minerva; she never expected the turmoil of the next day. If she had, she'd most likely have taken a few days off to visit relatives. Or maybe not.

A rapid knocking on the portrait door warden interrupted her morning. Somewhat groggy from her long night, she yelled, "Open!"

Hermione Granger –or was it Potter?- fell through the doorway. Bouncing to her feet, she snapped, "Come to Remus' quarters, we've a problem."

.oOo.

Harry dashed through the hall, the breeze whipping his hair this way and that. Finally, I get to do something! Harry was very much an

'action' person. Despite Severus Snape's taunting, Harry was no moron. His IQ was a mere seven points below Hermione's. However, where her talent primarily lay in the ability to exercise abstract thought to a finite conclusion, his strength lay in the ability to fuse many variables to a course of action in the blink of an eye.

Their original plan to let the timeline proceed had been a viable one. They would use their foreknowledge to their advantage in order to 'cherry pick' events which they wanted to prevent or alter. Logically, it was sound and Harry conceded it to himself and Hermione. At the same time he hated it. He chafed at the restriction. The past two nights he'd almost killed Wormtail so many times he'd lost count. His instincts screamed at him to act. On the one hand he wanted to rend and maim his family's betrayer. On the other, he wanted to secret The Rat away in order to demonstrate Sirius' innocence.

At a cost to his own temper and sleep, he'd held back from giving in to his desires. Now that things were going to hell, he was going to secure The Rat. If Peter was 'jostled' a bit on the way back to Remus' quarters, well, he didn't think any of his family would care too much. Sirius might be pissed that he didn't get a shot, though.

The thought of Sirius almost caused a giggle of happy anticipation to bubble up his throat. Sirius was alive. Remus and Minerva, too. Should we bring Filius in on the secret? he wondered as he thundered up the steps to the boys' dormitory.

Pushing the thought to the side, he slowly opened the door. He'd already Silenced his feet, so he approached Ron's bed without making a sound.

Settling himself, he wordlessly performed the Summoning charm. With the rustle of sheets and curtains, a large grey rat flew out of Ron's bed. Hastily casting the Stunning charm, he knocked out Wormtail in mid flight.

Easily catching the quiescent Rat in his left hand, Harry let out a shaky breath. His usual trick was to summon a Death Eater and while the Slave of Voldemort was off balance, hit him with a Vanishing spell. The brain was the usual target of the spell. Harry liked it because it was a very effective and bloodless way to put a Death Eater down. Most people didn't know how to counter it, either. Out of pure habit, he almost cast that at Wormtail. Luckily, The Boy-

Who-Lived remembered at the last minute to focus on Stunning The Rat and not gleefully removing his brain from his fuzzy little skull.

He stuffed The Rat into his pocket while turning to hustle back to Remus' quarters. Puffing a bit I need to start running again, this body's not in shape, he stopped suddenly. Neville was in the doorway, a dressing gown about him, his hair wet and a confused expression on his face.

"Harry, what are you on about with Ron's rat?" the Longbottom scion asked in a low tone.

FUCK! Harry raged internally. "Look Neville, it's a very long story that I don't have time to tell right now. Just know that things aren't as they seem."

Neville evaluated Harry with a long, contemplative expression. Finally, he nodded, "Alright then, I'll hold you to explaining this later." Silently, he moved to his wardrobe to pull out his clothes for the day.

Nodding at his friend, for Neville was most definitely his friend, Harry hurried out of the dorm as if the devil himself were on his heels.

.oOo.

Harry scooted through the door that led to Remus' quarters. Turning, he bolted down the passageway that led to the large receiving room that each professor had attached to their quarters.

Feeling the lumpy weight of Wormtail in his pocket, Harry pushed thoughts of the betrayer aside. Hopefully, Sirius was in the room five feet in front of him. He was excited, but not nearly as excited as he had been when he first arrived in the past. This wasn't his Hermione, but it was close.

Opening the door, his mind registered that Minerva and Hermione were already present and seated. He somehow recognized that Remus had stood, but his consciousness was completely consumed by the ragged wizard sitting in a wingback chair by the fire.

Sirius.

A ragged smile broke upon his face which was matched by a Padfoot special – a devious grin with the hint of charm. Slowly, Sirius rose to approach his godson. Throwing caution to the wind, Harry ran to Sirius, embracing him a hug. They were quiet, just holding each other, reassuring each other that they were really there. That they were all alive.

"It's good to see you Padfoot."

"It's good to see you, too, Pronglet."

They both surreptitiously sniffled back tears (which fooled no one) before taking their seats.

"Hermione gave us the gist of everything while you were gone," Sirius rasped.

Harry nodded, "Good. I've got him here," he patted his bulging pocket. Reacting to Remus and Sirius' rabid expressions, he held his palm up, "If I can keep from killing him, so too can you."

Remus' expression fell before he nodded. Sirius looked away while nodding and grumbling under his breath.

"So, where do we go from here?" Remus asked.

"Well," Hermione began, "We're afraid of changing the timeline too much. If we turn Peter in, we lose a chance at Voldemort when he's weakest."

Minerva, Remus and Sirius were still. Finally, Remus asked, "Do you know where he is now?"

"Somewhere in the forests of Albania."

"Hmmm," Remus hummed as he leaned back in his chair while scratching his chin.

"So, why don't you want to change the timeline too much?" Sirius asked in his disused voice. "The way I understand it, Voldemort wins if we stay on this path."

Hermione wagged her head in a 'so-so' motion. "True, but our plan is to hit him when he's most vulnerable. In the graveyard in early summer the year after next."

Sirius' brow crinkled while Minerva pursed her lips. Remus took a deep breath before taking the plunge, "I understand what you're saying, but wouldn't we be better served taking the offensive than playing a defensive strategy? Dumbledore's always advocated and pursued defence over offense and we'll lose the war following Dumbledore's lead, correct?"

"True..." Hermione admitted.

Harry was becoming more and more agitated as the three 'adults' questioned the wait and see plan they'd been pursuing. Fear rose up in him like a snake. It coiled about his heart, constricting and squeezing. His breathing was little more than shallow pants as he escalated into a full scale panic attack.

Before Hermione could go on, Harry bolted to his feet like a scalded cat. Sharp breaths rushed in and out of his nose sounding like a miniature freight train.

Alarmed, Hermione tentatively reached out to her husband, "Harry...?"

He shook his head in jerky motions while he continued to pace. The others had gone quiet as the youngest of the group walked back and forth like a pendulum. Finally Sirius croaked, "Pronglet, sit down. We need to discuss this..."

He was cut off by a sharp jabbing motion of Harry's hand. The Boy-Who-Lived turned on his godfather, a terrified expression on his face, tears pooling in his eyes. "Don't you get it?" he nearly shouted. "You all DIED!"

Wheeling on Sirius, he spat, "You! You were fucking around with Bellatrix and she killed you with a fucking Banishing charm! All because you weren't paying attention and not taking her seriously! Goddam you Sirius!"

Wheeling on Remus he cried, "Macnair cut you into pieces Remus! He hacked you up like a cow and fed you to Greyback's pack! Only

after they raped Tonks to death in front of you, of course! Who knows what happened to little Teddy!"

Turning to Minerva with despair etched across his features, he told her, "You didn't look both ways before crossing the street. Something taught to toddlers; so a lorry with bad brakes killed you."

Finishing his circuit, he turned to Hermione. Mouth opening and closing like a landed fish, he couldn't speak. Dropping to his knees he sobbed, "You died. You left me."

The tears came in earnest now. Sobs wracked his frame as the grief of so many years and so many deaths enveloped and consumed him.

All of them were frozen in place with Harry's outburst. Hermione regained her composure first before flying to her husband's side.

"I'm here, Harry. I'm here, baby, I'm here..." she cooed to him as she rocked her man in her arms. Harry blubbered and cried, the tsunami of feelings wouldn't be restrained.

Wiping his face with shaking hands, Remus moved to speak, but Harry beat him to it.

"I can't lose you all again," Harry whispered. "I can't."

.oOo.

In the end, they tabled the discussion. Remus brewed a very powerful Sleeping potion which he forced down Peter's throat with a dropper. Minerva did the duty for confinement by conjuring a steel box with no seams, Peter trapped within.

Remus headed for Hogsmeade to purchase some healing and restorative potions for Sirius. And a replacement rat for Ron. Harry had shoved a bag full of gold in Moony's hand and waved off his nascent protests. "Go," he'd commanded.

Minerva 'tsked' before giving Sirius a quick haircut and charming off his scraggly beard. As Sirius rubbed his now smooth chin, Harry joked, "Padfoot, you'd best use Moony's shower."

With an exaggerated sniff at his armpit, Sirius drawled, "I'm fine."

"Shower. Now." Minerva commanded in her best teacher's voice.

Smiling with real affection, he bowed at the neck before replying, "Yes, Professor McGonagall."

Her face softened as she gave him a playful shove, "Scamp. Go, you stink."

When Sirius had disappeared into the bathroom, Minerva slowly turned to Harry before she asked, "Are you well, now?"

His face still a bit blotchy, Harry gave a one shouldered shrug. "I'll be Ok." Minerva stared hard at him. His eyes mirrored Sirius' for a quick moment; empty and hollow.

Hermione wrapped her arm around him before giving Minerva a reassuring nod. She'd take care of her man.

.oOo.

"Is it only lunch?" Harry asked.

Hermione gave a cynical snort, "Feels like it should be supper or even breakfast for tomorrow. I'm beat."

Under his breath, Harry told her, "Neville saw me take Scabbers. He wants an explanation."

Face crumpling with frustration, Hermione groaned, "This is the last thing we need now."

"That was my thought." He glanced at her sidelong, "Memory charm?"

She flinched at the thought. "I don't like it."

He sighed, "Neither do I." Taking a bite of his sandwich, he pondered. "Do we tell him? Do we ask him to trust us?"

His thinking aloud was derailed when Hermione joined in, "Maybe we give him a part of the truth. Tell him about Moony and the

Marauders. Remus pulled us aside after the last Defence lesson to tell you that he knew your dad, was best friends with him, in fact. We stopped by his quarters today to listen to him reminisce. We'll say that we recognized The Rat from Moony's stories about your dad so..."

He leaned in, planting a very thorough kiss on his wife. "I knew there was a reason I married you," he added playfully.

"Admit it, I'm smart," she teased.

"You're the best, babe." His tone was playful, but the emotion behind the statement was serious. The haunted look from earlier still lingered in his eyes.

Recognizing his sentiment, she gave him a sad smile while squeezing his hand. "I love you," she told him in an undertone.

"And I you. With all my heart."

.oOo.

It had been a long day. They checked back on Sirius in Moony's quarters, only to find him dead asleep while seven different healing potions worked on him.

"He'll be out for a few days. Picking up pneumonia was the least of his worries. Staph infections, two broken fingers, a stress fracture in his leg and to top it off, he has the Flu." Shaking his head, Remus told them, "We can all catch up more in a few days. He'll be fine here."

"What about Dumbledore?" Hermione asked.

His eyes narrowing, Remus replied, "Minerva is taking care of that. She's responsible for guests who visit the professors, so she's back dating the visitor log and snowing Dumbledore."

"Snowing Dumbledore?" Harry commented. "Is that possible?"

"Sure, she can. Apparently, she slips her pet projects past him on Wednesday nights. That's when he deals with Wizengamot or ICW paperwork. What's today?"

"Wednesday," Harry answered with a smile.

"Excellent!" Remus replied with a mischievous smile. "Five points to Gryffindor, Mr Potter!"

Finally, they made it back to the tower after a boring Charms class. Sitting side by side in the window seat gave them a sliver of privacy amidst the hustle and bustle of the common room.

"Harry, Hermione, can we talk?"

The Potters turned to see Neville fidgeting behind them. "Hey mate," Harry called. Waving him to a seat next to them, Harry turned his body to face their friend. Discreetly, Hermione drew her wand to cast a Privacy ward.

Visibly nervous, Neville fidgeted as he sat. "Neville, about earlier," Harry began. "Professor Lupin was best friends with my dad and mum when they were in students here. That's why he asked us to stay behind after class the other day. He wanted to introduce himself on a more personal basis."

Hermione chimed in, "We stopped by after breakfast this morning and he was telling stories. Apparently they were all animagi in school. One of their friends was Peter Pettigrew."

Neville frowned, "I've heard that name."

"Yeah, he was supposed to be a hero for cornering Sirius Black, but Black killed him." Harry's eyes narrowed in genuine malice, "Pettigrew was a rat animagus."

Neville's eyes widened as his mind made the connection. "Scabbers...?"

Harry nodded, "Yeah. We took him to Professor Lupin who recognized him immediately. He did a spell which forced him back to his human shape. Sure enough, Peter Pettigrew."

"Wow," Neville breathed.

"Yeah. Hey, Nev, you can't tell anyone. This is a really big deal legally and all. We already got a rat to replace Pettigrew, Ron shouldn't know the difference." Harry had a decidedly earnest expression on his face.

"Sure, sure. No problem, I won't say anything." His chubby face screwed up in determination, "You can count on me, Harry."

His heart falling into his feet, Harry forced a smile on his face, "Thanks Nev. Thanks a lot."

.oOo.

"I am such a dick."

Hermione snuggled closer into Harry's side. They were snuggled in his bed, Sticking charms holding the curtains closed, Imperturbable charm keeping all sound in; they had a private bubble for themselves.

Sleeping apart had lasted a grand total of three nights. Sure, they both missed the sex, but the closeness, the physical intimacy of sharing a bed is something that all married couples can attest to missing. Even for only one night.

Their socially acceptable reasons for sleeping together didn't preclude them taking advantage of the situation. They relaxed in their post-coital afterglow, dozing in each other's arms.

"You're not a dick," Hermione countered.

"I am. I took advantage of Neville's trust in me to spin a yarn and lie to him."

"Really. What did you tell him that was a lie? That Scabbers was Peter Pettigrew's animagus form? That Remus was a childhood friend of your parents?"

"Come on, love. You and I both know that I lied to him."

Rubbing her hand on his hairless chest, she gave him a soft kiss. "I love you. You're a good man. We'll talk tomorrow about what we should do about Neville and Luna, Ok?"

He nodded sleepily, "Ok. Love you."

"I love you, too," she told him sadly. Harry drifted off to sleep quickly, but Hermione didn't fall off until after midnight. She had much to think about.

.oOo.

"Once more into the breach..." Hermione told Harry as she opened the door to the Potions classroom.

Harry and she'd talked some with Remus about the best way to deal with Snape. As he'd borne the brunt of Severus Snape attacks for years, they thought he'd be a good person to ask advice. They knew Sirius' advice would be 'prank him until he shits himself'.

Part of Remus' advice was centred on pranking. "I knew that I'd either pranked him quite viciously or was about to do the same. It helped me keep my tongue."

A less savoury reason also came up. "When Lily and I became friends in fourth year, she told me a bit about Severus. He had an extremely unhappy home life growing up. I don't know for sure, but I believe his father beat him."

Harry paled at the thought, his opinion of Severus Snape changed forever.

Shrugging at the uncomfortable thought, Remus finished, "I felt sorry for him to tell the truth. I'm sure he'd be infuriated if he knew that. His ego is quite massive."

"As big as my dad's?" Harry queried in a mock-innocent voice.

Barking a genuine laugh, Remus replied, "Not even close, Harry. I believe James had the world record until he deflated his head during sixth year."

All this information fermented, bubbled and eventually calmed Harry. It didn't mean that Snape was any less of a prick, though.

Harry had a plan, though and it involved The Twins and a gallon of axle grease. Maybe two gallons.

Surprisingly, Snape was semi-human during the lesson. Of course he got a few verbal jabs in on Harry and Neville, his favourite targets. Remus was right, the combination of Snape's tragic childhood coupled with a pretty severe prank in the future allowed Harry to maintain a semblance of equilibrium.

On the way out of the classroom, Hermione wrapped her arm around Harry's waist, slowing him down from the herd as it thundered out of the dungeons. When they were walking alone, she leaned in and asked, "What?"

Sort of confused, but not really, he replied, "What, what?"

She narrowed her eyes in mock annoyance, "You know."

He couldn't keep up the pretence any longer as he began to chuckle. "I've a plan!"

"A plan?"

Pinning her to the wall and thoroughly kissing her, he broke off a minute or so later before he announced in mock triumph "Yes, a plan!"

Completely distracted, she grabbed his hand to drag him back to the tower and his bed, "Great, you've a plan, let's go."

.oOo.

Arriving at lunch a little mussed but thoroughly happy, Harry and Hermione sat across from Neville. "Hey mate!" Harry greeted.

Neville smiled back, a little shyly. He seemed to be breaking out of his shell faster than he ever did fifth year. He still lapsed back into his shy ways on occasion, but on the whole, his personality was expanding at an incredible rate.

Harry was grabbing for the platters for their lunch so he didn't see her wander up to the table. Hermione smiled as Luna plopped down next to Neville, across from Harry. "Hello, Luna," Hermione greeted.

"Good afternoon, Hermione. You seem quite happy."

Accepting the platter of roast beef from Harry, she replied, with the hint of a blush, "Yes, I am quite happy."

With a knowing smile, Luna turned to Neville, "Hello, Neville."

Blushing for an entirely different reason, Neville replied, "Erm, hello. I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

"Luna Lovegood."

Neville frowned, "Of Ottery St. Catchpole?"

Luna nodded around her spoonful of soup.

Nodding in understanding, Neville formally introduced himself, "I'm Neville Longbottom of the Longbottoms from Green Hills."

"How do you do?" Luna replied with the ritual response.

"Well, and yourself?"

"Quite well, thank you."

Harry rolled his eyes as the etiquette dance played out across the table. Reaching for the milk, he poured for himself and Hermione.

Hermione smiled as she waited for their friends to finish introducing themselves. Mad Eye hadn't known if Neville and Luna were in a relationship when they'd been killed, but they had been together. Who knew, she may be seeing the beginning of a lifelong romance in front of her over French Onion soup and roast beef.

Finally, Neville turned to Harry to ask, "So how'd you keep your temper today? Snape wasn't as bad as he usually is, but he was still pretty stiff. After last lesson, I expected you to hex him."

With a devious grin, Harry answered, "It's a secret, but you'll see."

As if on cue, The Twins bounced in the Great Hall, grins wide and eyes bright. "You rang, o Son of Prongs?" George intoned. Fred waved the letter Harry had sent via Hedwig earlier in the day.

A quick wave of Holly and Phoenix feather incinerated the parchment. Kissing the crown of Hermione's head, he stood, "Lads, we're off to meet Moony." When their eyes widened in anticipation, he added in an undertone, "And to plan a prank of unprecedented proportions."

.oOo.

Hermione sat in the library savouring the entire atmosphere. She had been looking forward to this; sitting alone in her corner of the library, a small stack of books to work through. Spending all her time alongside Harry had hardly been drudgery. If anything, there was a tug on her soul when they separated, even for short periods.

At the same time, it was good for both of them to be by themselves. They were two very independent persons who needed their own pursuits. I'll just have to shag his brains out later. Smugly smiling at the thought, she dug into an advanced Transfiguration text.

Thoroughly engrossed in the proofs behind Gamp's law, she didn't hear him sneak up behind her. She didn't realize that anyone stood over her shoulder until Malfoy stole her wand from the table. Shooting to her feet, she wheeled about and punched the Ferret in the throat. As the bigoted chump fell, she instinctively grabbed her wand from his limp hand.

Watching Draco Malfoy wheeze while lying on the floor of the library, Hermione had the war inside her resolve itself. On one side, she had just violently reacted to an attack, which could have resulted in her injury or death. On the other hand, all the blonde boy had done was to take her wand. He could have only planned to taunt her or other such childish antics.

Could have planned to do, but what would he truly have done?

Right then the doubt and confusion she'd been working through since she'd arrived in the past fell away. She'd been of two minds regarding dealing with the worst of the offenders to come. Oh, some were easy. When they got the chance, Lucius Malfoy, Walden

Macnair, Alecto and Amacus Carrow were all going to die. So too would many other of the older generation of Death Eaters.

But what should they do about the new generation? What about Draco Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, Adrian Pucey, Theodore Nott and so on? Even Severus Snape was a bit of a quandary for her. They hadn't done anything yet that warranted execution.

In that seminal moment in the Hogwarts Library, she began to see clearly. Draco Malfoy hadn't yet done anything worthy of his death, but he would. The person that he was, the path that he was on would inevitably lead him to visit death and destruction upon his fellows. There was very little doubt about his path. Should she spare his life on the slim possibility that he may turn out to be decent human being? Should she allow him to kill, maim, torture or rape an innocent to assuage her conscience?

Others such as Blaise Zabini, Robert Higgs and even Pansy Parkinson were in a different category. During the war, they'd followed the Dark Lord, taken his mark and helped lead the uprising and eventual subjugation of Europe. They'd also held back from the worst of the atrocities. In fact, Hermione knew that Zabini had been an administrator for public health under Emperor Voldemort.

However, like the Nazis of the thirties and forties, the administrators were guilty of aiding and abetting the atrocities perpetuated by others.

What to do about them? The bureaucrats and others of their type? They were hardly innocent, but had they committed capital crimes?

That problem wasn't so easily solved, but Draco Malfoy's fate was sealed on a late September day in the Hogwarts Library. He would die, and soon.

"You are the most foolish cretin it has ever been my misfortune to meet," she told the prone and gasping Malfoy scion. Her expression cold and her tone colder, she elaborated, "You are doomed, you know that don't you?"

"My father..." he croaked in his habitual response.

Rolling her eyes, she stomped on his face, breaking his nose and rendering him unconscious.

Thoroughly annoyed, Hermione stunned the Ferret. A quick Disillusionment charm followed by a series of Cleansing charms on the floor removed the traces of blood. Glancing around, she saw no one, so she incanted, "Obliviate," while rotating her wand in the requisite pattern. Draco Malfoy had just lost the previous half hour of his life. After a moment of indecision, she sighed, pointed her wand and incanted, "Episky," repairing the blonde boy's nose.

Shoving him underneath the table, Hermione checked her books out from Madam Pince. She found that she actually had missed the shrewish librarian. Like a touchstone, Madam Pince was a signpost of a happier age of Hermione's life.

Returning to her table, Hermione packed her books and supplies. Surreptitiously levitating the son of Lucius Malfoy, she headed out of the library to find an empty classroom far from where they'd had their encounter.

.oOo.

The Twins and Harry were chuckling as they left Remus' suite. He'd cleared it with the Marauder before bringing Fred and George to visit. So long as they were discreet, he had no problem chatting.

Fred and George were euphoric, in awe and excited about meeting a real life Marauder, as well as, discussing pranks and pranking methodology. Remus had told them of James' brainchild: The No Method Prank.

It was well known at Hogwarts in the seventies that the Marauders were pranksters. It was also a source of endless detentions for the four friends. In fourth year, James had realized their problem. He and Remus had been Transfiguration and Runes prodigies, respectively. Their pranks had played to those strengths.

Minerva McGonagall was no idiot, though. Even though most of The Marauders' pranks had been relatively harmless (unless it involved Severus Snape), she tired of being berated at the weekly staff meeting by Horace Slughorn over her charges admitted persecution of the unlikable Slytherin. Therefore, when she saw the pattern in

the boys' pranks, she took action. For the first half of the fall term, the boys had detention nearly every night. It had been a sign of Minerva's soft heart that she'd allowed the foursome to do homework for half the time so they didn't fall too far behind.

Inspired by being constantly caught, James realized they needed to branch out. Potions, goops, pastes, static charms and transfigurations and so on needed to be incorporated into The Marauders' repertoire.

There was a twofold effect. The detentions ceased for the most part, as the professors lacked a *modus operandi* or evidence to pin various pranks on the boys. Also, their grades rose across the board.

George and Fred relied mostly on Potions related pranks. Remus encouraged them to consider Runes and Charms as sources. In fact, Harry and the Twins were going to use Runes and a little known fact about the Hogwarts Apparition wards.

They bumped into Hermione on the way back to the Tower. Her hair was still a bit dishevelled and she was slightly out of breath.

"Hey, Hermione," Harry called. He didn't want to be too affectionate in front of the Twins. They were supposed to be newly dating thirteen and fourteen year olds after all. "How was the library?"

Not meeting his eyes, she shrugged before replying, "It was Ok."

Frowning, Harry stopped, Fred and George along with him. Knowing her far too well to let her upset pass, he pressed, "What happened?"

"It was nothing. Malfoy was being a prick, that's all."

The smiles fell from the male faces. "What happened?" Harry asked again.

Sighing in exasperation, she summed up, "He took my wand while I was reading. Before he said anything, I punched him in the throat and broke his nose." She met his gaze meaningfully, "I took care of everything."

Understanding her meaning, he nodded, but the tension didn't leave him or Fred and George. In fact, the redheaded twins became more serious, "What else?" George asked, his voice ominous and serious.

Touched, Hermione told them, "Guys, I took care of it. A quick Memory charm and a half-assed Bone Knitting charm and the Ferret won't even remember it." She smirked, "And his nose won't ever be straight again."

Fred and George exchanged a look before reluctantly nodding. "We'll leave it alone for now. If he does something else, though, pranking is going to be the least of his worries."

A small smile crossed Hermione's lips, "Thanks guys."

Solemnly nodding, George replied, "No worries. We'll see you two lovebirds later." With a last evaluating look, Fred nodded and turned away with his brother.

.oOo.

"Give me your wand."

Harry was very suspicious now. Silently handing over the holly wand, he eyed his wife/girlfriend/best friend with a calculating eye. "It was that bad?"

"You have to promise not to go after Malfoy."

"Fong. It was that bad."

She merely nodded in reply.

Sighing, he muttered, "Fine. I won't go after the Ferret."

Snuggling under his arm on the loveseat in the Room of Requirement, Hermione related to Harry what had happened in the library. More importantly, she related to him her revelation regarding the future Death Eaters.

"Moony's not going to like it," was Harry's first impression. "Neither will Minerva." He laughed to himself, "Sirius will say, 'No fucking shit'."

Hermione laughed. That's exactly what Sirius would say. Stilling, she hesitantly asked, "What do you say?"

His expression hardened. Eyes narrowed, he told her, "No fonging shit, babe. No fonging shit."

They sat there in silence, digesting their resolution. Eventually, she pointed out, "I don't want to go hunting if Minerva and Remus feel strongly about it."

Eventually, he nodded, "I agree, though, our little family...we need them. For more than just Voldemort, I mean."

Pursing his lips, Harry pulled Hermione closer as he thought further about it. The witch in his arms continued, "We're not alone anymore. This isn't the last gasp against the Emperor; this is our surgical strike to avert The Second Blood War and the later reign of Voldemort."

Nodding absently, Harry muttered, "Wizarding Britain can go fuck itself as far as I'm concerned. I just want to live my life with you without that moron Voldemort breathing down our necks."

Not bothering to reprove him, she nodded in agreement. She was positive that Minerva and Remus wouldn't like that attitude, not one bit.

.oOo.

Dinner was quiet. They sat with Neville, but Luna was nowhere to be found. Remus and Minerva sat at their places at the Head Table. For the first time since they'd returned to the past, Albus Dumbledore joined the student body for dinner.

Not wanting to take any chances at the sharp old man noticing anything amiss, they didn't look to the front table, nor engage in any conversation. Fifteen minutes after dinner started, Harry and Hermione finished their meal. Leaving the Great Hall both let out a loud breath, the tension leaving their shoulders at the same time.

Harry cocked an eyebrow at Hermione as if to say, "That went well."

She rolled her eyes as if to say, "You're an idiot."

He laughed as he grabbed her hand. Swinging their arms between them, they smiled at each other as they made their way toward the main staircase and from their back to the Tower.

"Disgusting Potter. A mudblood. Well, since your mother was one, I guess your standards are pretty low. How do you stand the stench?"

Just like two days before, Harry froze. When Ron insulted Hermione, Harry knew deep inside that Ron was attacking from bitterness and feelings of rejection. Malfoy, on the other hand, was a little prick.

Slowly Harry turned to see Malfoy and the Bookends. As usual, Draco was surrounded by his thugs while he bore a shit eating grin.

A strong wind began to whip up the passageway and Harry's eyes began to glow a bright blue. Sparks shot from his fingers as he clenched his fists repeatedly.

The smug smile fell from Malfoy's face and was replaced by an expression of fear. The wind began to shriek and the Slytherins bent almost double to remain standing.

Silently, Harry raised a finger to Malfoy, pointing at him; promising retribution and punishment if the Malfoy scion continued his insults.

Draco fainted.

Sneering, Harry glanced at the bookends who took their cue. Scooping up an arm each, they ran away from Harry and Hermione, heading toward the safety of the dungeons.

When they were alone in the hallway again, the wind faded to nothing and Harry's eyes returned to their normal green. Then he collapsed.

Hermione caught him on the way down, shrieking his name. Eventually, she regained her wits and for the second time that day, levitated an unconscious person through the halls of Hogwarts. This time, they were headed to Remus' quarters.

.oOo.

"Magical Exhaustion," the grey haired Scot diagnosed. Turning to Hermione, Minerva asked, "Are you sure you don't want to take him to Poppy?"

Absently, Hermione shook her head. "Too many questions that'll come to Dumbledore's attention. We can't get his eye on us. He's too smart, too crafty and too relentless."

Once again, Remus was off to Hogsmeade's apothecary. This time, Minerva and Hermione sat down with him and the threesome knocked up a list of potions and remedies they'd probably need in the near future.

Sirius was still out like a light on a conjured bed in Remus' bedchamber. Next to him was Harry. "It looks like an infirmary in here," Minerva muttered.

Hermione ignored her, continuing her study of Harry. Finally, her eyes flicked over to the Transfiguration Professor. Seeing Minerva's focus on Harry as well, Hermione asked, "Why, do you think?"

"The magical exhaustion?"

Hermione nodded.

Rubbing her chin, Minerva sat back on her chair. "I'm not sure. His magical core's reading is all over the place. Mostly, though, it's huge." Her eyes narrowed before indicating toward the couch. Hermione lay down as bid, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Lay still, child. This'll just take a moment."

After various diagnostic spells and repetitions of the same, Minerva sat back, indicating that Hermione could sit up.

"Well?" Hermione asked.

"Your magical core is the same. I have no idea what is going on. Poppy would know..."

"But we're not going to see her," Hermione finished.

Minerva visibly bit her lip, withholding the comment that was aching to burst out. She was not used to one of her Lions telling her which way was up. Treating Harry and Hermione as peers had actually come effortlessly, once they'd shared memories in her pensieve. She believed they even looked different to her.

Hermione ignoring and countermanding her desires was very different for Minerva. Swallowing her pride, she also swallowed the biting remark that had wiggled its way up her throat.

"In short, I don't know what is going on with you or Harry. We can only wait until Remus returns, ply our boy with potions and wait until he wakes."

Nodding, Hermione sat on Remus' couch and did what she did best. Her eyes darted from Harry to Sirius and back before she said, "Hunh."

An eyebrow cocked was Minerva's only sacrifice to her curiosity. Turning to her teacher and mother-figure, Hermione commented, "This episode in the hallway was the first time Harry did high-power magic since we came back." She shook her head as she remembered, "I felt the magic roiling off him in waves. It was almost nauseating, plus he created a gale force wind. The raw magic was leaking out of his fingers and eyes. It was impressive, terrifying and ..." Sexy as hell, she wanted to finish, but left that part out.

.oOo.

Remus returned around nine o'clock, so they dosed Harry as best they could while he was sleeping. Hermione stayed on Remus' couch, watching her man through the night.

She and Remus talked most of the night. The soft night time chatter as they got to know each other again. He was so painfully shy and withdrawn. Most likely due to his affliction.

Hermione was not known for being outgoing and vulnerable in her relationships. Mainly it was domineering and bossy. Except with those she loved. It had been with Harry first. She'd slowly let down the defence mechanisms which were her walls that shut out the ugliness of the world, which protected her from harm. Eventually, she and he were able to just be together. There was no pretence, no

guile of any kind. That was when she knew that she loved Harry. He was the one for her, the only person with whom she'd ever been completely at ease. The only man with whom who she trusted the whole of her self.

Remus was a good man. She knew that then and she knew that now. She trusted him with a small amount, so they talked fairly freely. He was as reserved about personal matters as she; his Lycanthropy had burned reticence into his psyche. Around one in the morning, the question she'd been expecting was finally asked.

"Hermione, who was Teddy?"

"Are you sure you want to know?" There was a long pause as Moony seriously considered the question. Finally, he nodded.

"He was your son."

Remus was quiet for a full ten minutes. The shock on his face shone stark in the light of the waning moon. His mouth worked a few times before he gave it up as a bad job. Sitting back, he tried to absorb the idea that he not only married a woman, but they had a child together.

Feeling for the man, she rose from Harry's bedside to sit next to Remus. Taking his hand, she told him, "Your fate isn't written. If you want to pursue a relationship with Tonks, I think you should. She's a great person and I'm sure you two will be great together. Minerva thought you were a wonderful couple."

He was breathing rapidly, almost panicking.

Poking him hard in the ribs, she got his attention. "Look, you aren't a monster." He snorted in disagreement.

Pinching the underside of his arm, she refocused him on her words. "As I was saying. You're not a monster. You become something quite horrid for three days a month, but that doesn't make you a monster. Harry jokes that I become a monster for five days a month."

Remus smiled as he rolled his eyes.

Continuing, glad that her attempt at humour worked, she laid out the truth as she saw it, "If she can love you for who you are, not what you are, then why should you deny each other the opportunity for true love? Because of insecurity? Fear?"

He had no answer to her poignant questions. Like Hermione, he needed to mull over the issue for a while. She'd listen and be there for him when he wanted to talk. It's what friends did for each other.

Wrapping her arm about his shoulder, she squeezed. Remus was a good man. She was glad to have him back in her life.

.oOo.

Harry and Sirius woke up the next day. Grateful that they only had Herbology, Hermione dragged him to the Great Hall for a hasty lunch. He wasn't really cognizant of their surroundings, though.

At one point he turned to her and asked, "Hermione, why are we back at Hogwarts?"

Neville looked at Harry strangely while Hermione replied, "Because it's third year." He blinked at that.

"Third?"

She sighed in mock exasperation. "Harry, you really need to get to bed earlier, you're all fuddled today."

He was quiet for the rest of lunch and through Herbology. They partnered with Neville and Hermione was impressed with the boy's range of knowledge regarding plants and their magical properties.

"Neville, you are so good at this," she waved to indicate the greenhouse and its contents.

He blushed and shrugged, clearly uncomfortable with the praise. Waving, he made his way off to the castle, bustling up the path. Hermione thoughtfully watched him go.

"Hey," Harry interrupted her musings.

"Oh, feeling better now?" she teased.

"I guess. I wanted to check on the visitor."

She nodded. Interlocking their arms she leaned into him as they slowly made their way to the teachers' quarters.

.oOo.

"Hey, Sirius. How're you doing?"

"Hanging in there. A lot better, actually. How're you? Remus told me you had an issue. Something about magical exhaustion?"

"Yeah, we're not sure what's going on. Hermione's core is the same; fluctuating in power, growing, shrinking. The only consistent thing is that it's steadily expanding over time. We think it's something to do with the time travel."

"I've been thinking about that," Remus chimed in to the conversation. "Many magical cultures consider our magical core to be sourced in the soul. Different philosophers have different opinions, but another consistent thread is that our soul is unique to ourselves, so too is our consciousness. Therefore, the consciousness and magical core are both sourced in the soul. If that's true, when your consciousness time travelled, maybe your soul was the vehicle for that travel."

"And it brought our magic with us," Hermione breathed.

The foursome was quiet. The implications of the concept were staggering.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches..." Harry recited.

Nodding absently, Hermione replied, "Maybe, love. Maybe."

Looking to Harry from Hermione and back, Sirius irritably asked, "For those of us incarcerated for the last twelve years, what the hell are you on about?"

"You don't know about the prophecy?" Harry asked, surprised.

Rolling his eyes, Sirius replied with a knocking on Harry's head. "Obviously, Pronglet. Give."

Harry explained about Dumbledore hearing the prophecy from Trelawney which in turn forced the Potters and Longbottoms into hiding. "Hermione and I figure that's why he came for us that Halloween night."

Hollowly, Sirius countered, "He'd have come for James and Lily anyway. He wanted them badly. Since he couldn't have the Black's gold," Padfoot smiled sardonically, "He wanted the Potter's gold on top of the Malfoy's gold. Evil Dark Lords can't have enough gold in their pockets."

"He wanted them anyway," Remus remembered. "Lily was a phenomenal brewer and a budding Charms mistress. James was better than McGonagall at Transfiguration. I wouldn't have doubted he could have bested Dumbledore."

Wide eyed, Harry asked, "Really?"

"Really," replied Minerva from the doorway. "I'm not too proud to say that the student had far outstripped the teacher when it came to James Potter. He was, at least as good as Albus. I'm not as qualified to speak to Lily, but she and Severus were the only persons I've ever heard obtaining perfect scores on their Potions NEWTs."

As she settled into her trademark hard-backed chair, the Head of Gryffindor House look took on an appearance of seeing something far away. "I know it's unprofessional, but even before they graduated, James and Lily were my friends. She was such a likable woman and despite his best efforts, one couldn't help but love James Potter. I think all the females in the castle were a little in love with him."

Her eyes twinkled with a hint of remembered amusement, "You boys were so troublesome, but so much fun as well."

Sirius smirked while Remus replied with mock gravity, "We did our best, Minerva."

Turning back to Harry, she picked up the thread where she'd dropped it, "There were quite a few reasons why Tom Riddle called on the Potters of Godric's Hollow that Halloween night of '81."

.oOo.

The time travellers kept to Gryffindor Tower over the next few days. They'd been disappearing for long stretches far too often. Thankfully, most thought the 'new' couple was sneaking off for some quality snog time.

"We don't want to wake Dumbledore to pay attention to us, though."

"I still don't understand why we don't use the time turner to go back and let ourselves be seen in public."

Hermione had received the time turner before the Welcoming Feast. Since time travelling, however, she'd dropped Muggle Studies and Divination like a hot potato. With Minerva in the know, she hadn't asked for the device to be returned. It was a wild card that could help them attain their goal.

"We're mucking with the time stream enough. I'm afraid of what will happen if we cavalierly prance about, using it for no good reason. The Sirius and Buckbeak rescue was a good reason. Providing evidence that we aren't shagging in a broom closet to preserve our reputation, however, is not a good reason."

"Because we're shagging in my bed."

"Exactly," she purred before she kissed him thoroughly.

.oOo.

The weekend came and with it torrents of rain which lasted for the next week. The Highlands of Scotland are a very wet place. Even still, this quantity of rain forced even Oliver Wood to cancel the Quidditch practise scheduled for Saturday.

Harry and Hermione were making good progress reading through the animagus book Minerva had loaned them. Having two practicing animagi in the castle to consult also helped significantly. The

Transfiguration was fairly advanced, but the tokening process required some guidance from Sirius and Minerva.

"The meditative process described in the text will allow you to become more in tune with yourself and your surroundings," Minerva explained. "You will find items; a leaf, a flower, a sprig of grass and so on. These will connect with your inner beast and allow you a focus to help you in your initial transformation."

"Will these tokens all be natural, organic items?" Hermione asked.

"Well, I've never heard of an animagus tokening from a man-made item."

They spent time on the grounds whenever they could. Despite the curriculum being beyond simple for the duo, they still had written assignments they had to turn in, otherwise they'd attract attention from sources they'd rather not rouse. Harry usually completed the Charms and Potions assignments while Hermione focused on Runes, Creatures and Arithmancy. Remus and Minerva gave them a pass on their homework. They usually handed in blank pieces of parchment.

One time, Harry handed in an animated recording of him casting his Patronus. Remus had smiled happily to see the ghostly Prongs prancing across the parchment. He carefully laid it in his briefcase for later framing.

During one of the cancelled Quidditch practices, the five friends – family really – were gathered in Remus' quarters. It had become their de facto headquarters in the castle. They couldn't gather in Minerva's quarters as other staff members and students could come upon them at any time. Having Remus there wouldn't be too much out of the ordinary. But Harry, Hermione and Sirius/Padfoot would most definitely be noticed as out of the ordinary.

"We wanted to discuss something between us all," Harry began after they'd eaten a light lunch. Sirius was looking better day by day. A steady healthy diet while being surrounded by friends and family was doing wonders for his health. The haunted look in his eyes was fading more as time passed.

"One thing we've been conflicted about since we came back is what to do about the future Death Eaters," Hermione elaborated.

Minerva and Remus both nodded in understanding. They both had been contemplating the same thing.

"We know the bulk of the next generation here at Hogwarts right now. Obviously, killing two hundred students would be noticed." Sirius snorted but subsided under Minerva's glare.

"The older generation like Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange and their ilk are already condemned by their actions in the first Blood War." Silent acceptance from the other three was the only response.

"We've come to the conclusion that the worst of them need to go."

Frowns from Remus and Minerva preceded Sirius' "No fucking shit, Pronglet."

Harry almost smiled as he and Hermione had accurately predicted.

Pursing her lips, Minerva told the group, "I don't like it. We slaughter children for something they haven't yet done and may not do?"

"I'm unwilling to allow Draco Malfoy the chance to rape, kill or maim to assuage my conscience. What if his first victim was Lavender Brown? Katie Bell? Would you allow him to rape Parvati to ensure he really deserved to be eliminated?"

Minerva flinched under the verbal jabs, but said nothing.

Soothingly, Remus interrupted, "This is not something to be discussed lightly, much less agreed to in a five minute discussion. Both Minerva and Harry have valid positions which need to be considered and weighed by all of us. I suggest we consider the impact wholesale execution could affect us, as well as, the individuals."

With a haunted expression, Harry provided the answer, "it changes you, Moony. To that, we can attest."

Jerkily, Remus nodded his understanding, but was undeterred, "I need to think about this. I can't blithely condemn these people without substantial consideration."

Now it was Harry and Hermione's time to nod in understanding. They'd expected nothing less from Moony.

"What's the problem, Moons?" Sirius asked scathingly. "They're fucking scum who need to be cleansed from the earth."

"Padfoot, they're children."

"But they're going to be monsters!" He was wild eyed and the effect of Azkaban was as pronounced on him as the years of war were on Harry and Hermione.

Minerva held out her hands in a placating motion. "Peace. We'll all consider the situation and discuss it some more. I'm sure we'll revisit this on more than one occasion. Nothing shall be decided today."

The conversation became light as Minerva and Sirius discussed Harry and Hermione's progress in their animagus studying and preparation. Remus headed to his desk to grade sixth year essays. Their were difficult days ahead, but they were together. Family.

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to all who took the time to review the first few chapters, it's always appreciated. Story status can always be found on my FanFiction (dot) net author's page.

2. Recommendation for the chapter is Souls Abound, by Robst.

3. Lotta angst in the last few chapters. Worldviews are shifting, the timeline is written in sand with the tide coming in on them all and they aren't really sure where to go or what to do.

4. When I have to travel for work, I do everything I can to minimize the trip to one day or less. I sleep for shit when I'm away from my wife.

5. Malfoy and the Bookends, it could be the name of a band.

6. Yep, stole the animagus transformation process from MissAnnThropic. I got tired of inventing new and different ways to become an animagus. The relationships of the characters is what matters to me, the science of the magic is very secondary.

Chapter 4

"A leaf."

Hermione smiled while Harry watched the oak leaf in his hand as if it held the secrets to all existence. They'd spent the last few weeks out on the grounds studying and meditating. The tokening process of their animagus transformation was harder than either had expected.

Hermione had been convinced that Harry would do well in finding his tokens as he'd always been a very instinctive person. Since the tokening process was the path in which the witch or wizard became aware of and connected with the inner beast, she figured Harry was a shoe in for rapid accumulation of tokens.

Harry had been convinced that Hermione would do well as she never failed at anything she'd ever set her mind to accomplish. Occlumency, Legilimancy, Summoning and Banishing Rituals all fell before the machine that was Hermione Potter née Granger.

They were both right and both wrong.

It was very hard. All the guilt, shame and remorse over their roles in the history to come was a severe impediment to calming their psyches so that they could recognize their connection with the natural world around them. They were hardly innocents and their inner turmoil showed plain in their failings at the meditation.

Hermione had suggested confession of sorts. "You want me to go to church?" he had replied in disbelief.

Rolling her eyes at her husband, Hermione retorted, "No. Idjit. I wanted to know what you thought about laying it all out there with another person."

He looked decidedly uncomfortable, "But you know everything already."

She nodded. "I was actually intending to talk to Remus."

"Oh." His brow furrowed as he frowned. Humming as he considered the idea, she watched him intently. She was looking for that relaxing

around the corners of his eyes and mouth which indicated he'd give in to her desires.

It didn't come.

"I'll think about it," he temporized.

The next day, she'd gone to see Remus. Not one to beat around the bush, she addressed the problem as she saw it. With Harry and a disguised Sirius at Gringotts to place control of the Potter fortune squarely in the hands of the rightful heir, Hermione knew Remus would have the afternoon free.

Slipping into his quarters, she closed the door quietly. Moving toward Moony's lounge/receiving room she called, "Remus?"

"In here," he replied.

Picking up her pace, she found him at his desk with two piles of parchment. The neat pile of ungraded essays was small, while the heap of graded essays covered his feet and threatened to bury him altogether.

With a small smile, she offered, "I can come back later if it's a bad time."

"No!" he replied with mock desperation. "Save me from moronic fourth years who're convinced they hold the secrets to locking away evil forever."

She laughed lightly as she sat on Remus' now very familiar couch. He conjured a plain tea set after setting the kettle to boil.

"You don't heat the water magically?" she asked.

"Doesn't taste the same. Besides, if I can't wait five minutes for the kettle to boil, I've bigger problems."

She nodded, hesitant and afraid to begin.

"What can I do for you Hermione?" Remus asked to get the ball rolling.

They were interrupted by the shrill whistle of the kettle. Silently, Remus poured the hot water on the tea leaves before he left it to steep. "Sorry. What can I help you with?"

Softly, she told him, "I trust you Remus."

An expression of gentle surprise graced his face. The half smile was all the reply he needed. "I need to talk about...before. The nightmares are only held at bay because of Harry and..." she looked away, tears starting in her eyes.

Gently, Remus reached out to take her hand. Silently, he offered his support by his presence and by not flinching away.

Remus Lupin was a very smart man. He had to be to have been one of the masterminds that called themselves The Marauders. Where James had been the leader, Sirius the wit and Peter the comic relief; Remus had been their heart. That didn't mean he was stupid, though. He knew, or could realistically imagine, some of the atrocities that Hermione and Harry had seen and probably perpetrated. He also knew that this young couple who he'd come to love in a short time were not monsters. Therefore, those memories of war yet to come must be burdensome, to say the least.

When Hermione turned back to him, tears streaming down her cheeks, she croaked, "I've killed at least two hundred people, Remus. Some of them horribly. I set one man on fire and watched him burn to death. It took seventeen minutes for him to die Remus and I didn't make one attempt to lessen his pain or stop the fire." Now the tears were flowing in earnest.

He didn't try to comfort her at this point, as he knew she didn't want comfort yet. Holding her hand as a show of support, he nodded to her before saying, "Go on,"

So she did. For two hours she spilled the gruesome memories all over the quiet quarters. Remus never said anything other than quiet encouragement. He let go of her hand only to pour the tea which she used to wet her dry throat.

By the time lunch was being served in the Great Hall, Hermione was cried out. Finally able to allow comfort, she leaned into Remus'

embrace. He was her older brother, her favourite uncle and good friend all rolled into one for her.

"You did some horrific things, Hermione. But you're still a good person. We all love you very much, you know that, right?" When she nodded, he added, "I can't love an evil person. Nor can Minerva or Sirius. Especially, Harry. He could never love someone evil. You're a good woman, Hermione Potter. War brings out the beast in all of us."

She nodded her head, grateful she'd made the decision to confide in Remus. To say that she felt better was an understatement. The oppressive guilt and remorse from days to come that had been a millstone about her neck was gone. Although life wasn't peaches and cream, she began to believe in herself again. Not her abilities, for she'd never doubted her abilities one jot. She began to believe in Hermione; daughter of Steven and Alice, wife of Harry and loved by Minerva, Sirius and Remus. It was exhilarating.

.oOo.

At Gringotts, matters proceeded with remarkable alacrity for Harry and Sirius. Snagratt seemed to anticipate Sirius' arrival, having the entirety of the forms and documents prepared ahead of time. After Harry signed his name sixty three times and Sirius signed his fourteen times they proceeded to magically seal everything.

All in all, after four hours of reading, signing, casting and finally filing an even two stone of parchment, Harry was placed in the position of Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of The Potter Trust. All deeds and titles not held by the Trust were transferred accordingly, as well.

The blonde haired, brown eyed Sirius patted Harry on the shoulder as they left the bank. Striding confidently down the alley they didn't draw a second glance from the on duty Aurors. Something Mad Eye had taught Harry before had paid dividends. "Acting like you belong in a place is over half the battle. Most guards won't look at you twice if you have the right attitude."

Harry was quietly thoughtful as they wended through the midday crowds. With the lessening of the rain that had deluged the entire UK over the previous week, the shoppers were out in droves.

"What's bothering you?" Sirius asked in an undertone.

"Where will Hermione and I live when school is out?" His brow furrowed, "I have plenty of places to live, but I won't live without her. I can't."

Pursing his lips, Sirius Apparated away to the Honeydukes tunnel. When Harry arrived, Sirius asked, "Are you two going to tell her parents? That would solve it. You could live at her place, or her family could move to Rowan Hill. They should probably move in with you, there're better wards at the house in Wales."

A thoughtful expression on his face, Harry replied, "I don't know if we'll tell Steven and Alice. We've yet to talk about it."

Being uncharacteristically sensitive, Sirius gently told his godson, "Do that Har-bear. She's your wife and best friend. If you can't talk to her, who can you talk to?"

Harry jolted at Sirius' words about 'talking to people'. He'd unknowingly struck a nerve, but Harry covered it by grumbling, "Don't call me Har-bear. You called me that when I was shitting my nappy."

"Give me a night free and clear of the law, a few bottles of Firewhiskey and you'll be shitting your pants tomorrow," Padfoot crowed. Harry was following Sirius in the passageway, so Padfoot never saw Harry give him the two fingered salute.

.oOo.

The remaining Marauders and the Potters lounged about Remus' quarters early in the evening. Classes had settled down and so too had the tedium. Most times, Harry and Hermione read from the animagus book, but they'd finished it twice over by now and had asked Minerva for more material on the subject.

They were sitting on the couch, sharing a six pack of Guinness. Remus had looked askance when Harry had requested the stout,

but Sirius had quickly reminded him that it was Moony who had first sneaked Firewhiskey into the third year boys' dormitory in 1975.

Remus and Sirius were sharing a bottle of brandy and the foursome was pleasantly buzzed. They were laughing and carrying on about old times when Minerva opened the door to the common room, her expression stern.

Not speaking to any, she grabbed the bottle of brandy, conjured a tumbler, filled it to the rim and drank it off in one go.

Recognizing the signs, the other four quickly cast Sobriety charms on themselves.

"It's Severus. He asked me why my Lions are 'cavorting with a known werewolf'." Minerva's expression was hard, but her eyes burned with a deep felt fire.

There was quiet as the five some digested the news. Snape was bitter enough to spread the news far and wide, fanning the flames if he could extract a measure of revenge on his childhood tormentors. All knew it.

"Memory charm?" Remus suggested.

Hermione shook her head, "What would we erase? The last month and a half?"

"Fuck it, I say we transfigure him into a rock and drop him to the middle of the lake," Sirius snarled.

All five seriously considered the option. Eventually, Harry shook it off, declaring, "Dumbledore would have a snit and not rest until he knew what happened." Sirius sighed in resignation, but nodded agreement.

"The problem is that he's too proficient an Occlumencer. He'd either resist it or be aware of the gap in his memory," Hermione mused aloud.

"What if we..." Sirius laid out his idea.

After some modifications by Minerva and Hermione, they adopted Sirius' plan.

Harry saw Minerva's jaw tighten repeatedly throughout the discussion. Once they'd refined and adopted the plan, she abruptly rose to leave. Absently kissing Hermione on the mouth, he murmured, "Be back in a bit."

Hurrying after his head of house, he softly called, "Hold up."

Turning, she impatiently waited for Harry to draw even with her. "Let's go to your quarters."

Minerva cocked an eyebrow, "If you were thirty years older and I thirty years younger, I'd think your proposal was improper, Mr Potter." Rolling his eyes, he followed her to her rooms.

Minerva kept all the portraits in her private rooms and offices permanently frozen nowadays. On the one hand she wanted to always be ready for a 'situation' where she needed privacy from Albus' prying spies and also on principal. It galled her that the Headmaster was using the portraits in such a manner. She disrobed in rooms with portraits!

Cooking a quick dish of tea, Minerva set up biscuits and the milk absently. Finally sitting across from Harry, she was so distracted she didn't even notice he'd been watching her the entire time.

"What's bothering you, Min?"

Taken aback by his question, she blurted out the truth. "I've never wanted to kill a man so much as I wanted to kill Severus earlier."

Blinking in surprise, Harry paused before saying, "Didn't really expect that."

Now that she'd let the lid off the pot, she really began to simmer. "After all you've shown me and all I've seen that greasy Sassenach perpetrate on the student body, I wanted to rip his liver out and shove it down his throat!" Standing and panting like a racehorse, she ranted, "He stood there gloating and unctuous, grinning his yellow toothed smile with his disgusting breath a miasma. I wanted to curse his beak right off his face! Lording Remus' affliction over us all...."

Snorting in disgust, she pointed out, "Blackmail is what it was! He knows what Remus means to you, he knows that you've no real family and yet he wants to exploit the poor man's Lycanthropy to get a pound of flesh twenty years later! Damn him!"

Completely taken aback by Minerva's rant, Harry sat back to let her get it all off her chest.

Abruptly, she stopped, took in Harry's presence and sat down. Blushing slightly at being exposed in such an emotional manner, Minerva fidgeted for a moment before reaching for her teacup to hide her embarrassment.

"Don't worry about it Min. I could tell something was bothering you. I hope you feel better."

Nodding reluctantly, she told him, "I don't understand why Albus lets him run unchecked. I just can't fathom it."

Patting her on the shoulder, he told her, "And that is why you're a better person than Albus."

.oOo.

As with all the best plans, Sirius' plan to deal with Snape was simple and straightforward. The next night Sirius and Harry waited in the shadows of the dungeons near Snape's quarters, both of them Disillusioned. Hermione and Remus, who was Polyjuiced as Harry, were in the great hall lingering over supper.

Originally, Sirius had called for it to be Harry and Hermione lying in wait for Snape. Remus had argued that Harry would be a prime suspect, so he volunteered to acquire a dose of the transformative potion so that he could impersonate The Boy-Who-Lived. Anything can be purchased for a price in Knockturn Alley.

Snape stormed around the corner, his eyes intent on the door to his rooms. Wordlessly, Harry stunned and cast the Body Bind on the dour Potions master. Sirius ran forward, tapping Snape on the head, completing the Disillusionment charm for the head of Slytherin house.

On Silenced feet, Padfoot and Pronglet hustled Snape into a nearby classroom. Once inside, they bound their captive to a chair and forced a Confuzzle draught down his throat. After the prearranged three minute wait, Sirius positioned himself behind Snape, maintaining his own Disillusionment charm. Harry ended the charm on Snape before silently casting "Ennervate."

Harry was still Disillusioned while under his father's cloak. They were taking no chances that the Snarky Git would ever recognize his captor. Groggily, Snape awoke. Before he could get his bearings, Harry lashed out with a full power Legilimancy attack.

Reeling as if struck, Snape's unfocused eyes rolled under the assault. Picking his way through Snape's memories, Harry was repeatedly casting Memory charms, removing individual memories – a few moments here and a few moments there. Nothing that would be missed, but taken together, would eliminate Snape's suspicions and conclusions regarding Harry and Hermione's visiting Remus.

Harry was sweating with the exertion. Snape was many things, but he was a superior Occlumencer. Breaking past his shields, even with the effects of the Confuzzle draught had been a near Herculean task. Staying in his mind had been difficult as well. Combining the task of searching for pertinent memories with the delicate Memory charms left The Boy-Who-Lived sweating and gasping for breath. As the sweat dripped off his nose and he cast the last Memory charm of the sequence, he couldn't help himself and dove into Snape's greater memory bank.

It was a cess pit.

The things the man did as an active Death Eater made Harry want to puke. Rape. Murder. Torture. The use of all three Unforgivables was merely the beginning of the man's depravities. On top of it, the perverted things he thought about Lily Potter made Harry see red. Then, Harry found the memory of a night in Hogsmeade where Snape had crouched outside a door in the Hogshead pub, overhearing an interesting conversation.

"You fucking bastard!"

Before Sirius could react, Harry lashed out with three magically enhanced punches. The first shattered Snape's nose. The second

broke the man's right cheekbone into three separate pieces. The third ruptured Snape's windpipe.

The screaming gurgle that bubbled from Snape's mangled throat broke Sirius from his stupor. Instinctively stunning Harry, Sirius began to cast as many healing spells on his former nemesis as he could remember. Slowly, the man's screaming devolved into a low groan which in turn became a wheeze.

Satisfied that the odious man was breathing easily, he stunned the head of Slytherin before he shook his head in disbelief. Sirius Black had just defended Severus Snape. Hell just froze over while four pigs had flown over the Astronomy Tower. James must've been so disappointed in his best friend. After levitating his godson to the far side of the room, Padfoot woke him.

Harry's eyes were wild as he searched the room. Locking on the still bound form of Snape, Harry bolted to his feet only to be pushed back to the floor by Sirius.

"What the fuck, Harry? You damn near killed him?"

"He told Voldemort about the Prophecy. Snape put him on our trail," Harry snarled as Sirius' arms encircled The Boy-Who-Lived.

Slowly, Sirius turned, his expression blank. Walking up to Snape, he stared at the man for a long minute before he kicked him in the ribs. He kept kicking Snape with a viciousness that Harry had never imagined. Sirius only stopped when a satisfying snap announced the breaking of at least one bone. Panting hard, he turned to his godson.

"Fetch Minerva. We're going to need some Skele-gro if we want this to stay quiet." Sirius stood stock still, staring at the man bound to the chair in front of him as Harry hurried out the door.

.oOo.

It was to be a very long night.

A very, very long night.

Harry found Minerva in her quarters. Without outlining the situation, he merely summoned her and relayed the need for Skele-gro.

Cursing in her native Gaelic, she hustled to Remus' quarters, grabbed the odd bottle of potion before following Harry to the dungeons. She cursed the entire way.

"Holy sweet Mother of God," she murmured when she saw the Severus' state. Without asking questions about how Snape came to be in this condition, she merely asked, "Where is he injured?"

"Nose, cheekbone, ribs and maybe throat. I did what I could to repair that before Harry left," Sirius explained in a flat tone. The fire in his eyes hadn't dimmed one iota.

"Dammit," she cursed again. After a quick spell to determine Severus' weight, she measured a dose of the vile potion and poured it down his throat, a Swallowing charm assisting its passage.

Without taking her gaze from the monitoring charms she'd cast on their captive, she gave Harry his orders. "Go get Hermione and Remus. We'll need some delicate work to fix his memories for the evening. She's far more suited to it and you're wiped out," she told Harry.

Harry nodded before he left again. The remorse for his actions was starting to creep into his consciousness. Not remorse for hurting Snape, never that. It was, rather, remorse for putting them all into danger which was bothering him. Harry doubted he'd feel remorse even if he'd killed Snape tonight so long as it wouldn't importune the rest of his family.

The plan had been for Hermione and 'Harry' to return to the Gryffindor common room to do homework until nine or so. At that point, they'd head out for a 'snog' where they'd rejoin everyone else in Remus' quarters. Unfortunately, it was only eight o'clock.

Still under his cloak, Harry ran up to the Fat Lady, shouting the password. Slowing, he scuttled in the common room, flattening himself against the wall. Hermione and 'Harry' were on one of the couches in front of the fire, books open in their laps and noses buried deep. Moving as fast as he dared, for the common room was fairly full, he circled over toward the fireplace.

"Change in plans," he whispered. "Rendezvous now."

Without looking up, both Hermione and Remus-Polyjuiced-as-Harry nodded in understanding. Harry made his way to the portrait hole before drafting behind Remus as they exited. When Harry was sure they were alone, he murmured, "Things are pear shaped. We've got the target, but...it's complicated."

Remus nodded while Hermione only cocked an eyebrow. He was in for it, he knew it.

Harry cancelled the Disillusionment charm on himself before hiking up his cloak a bit. Remus and Hermione followed Harry's trainers as they moved to the dungeons. Dispelling Sirius' security spells, the threesome moved in the classroom. Harry erected a new set of wards and spells.

"What happened?" Hermione asked flatly. Harry barely noticed Remus regaining his natural form.

Carefully folding his cloak before placing it in the pocket of his robes, Harry delayed answering. His temper was spiking again as he thought about those revolutionary moments in Snape's mind. A few days before, he'd been on the verge of feeling sorry for the dour Potions Master for the man's hard lot in life. No more.

Snape chose his path in life. Harry himself had been brutally raised, just like life had been for young Severus Snape in Spinner's End. On more than one occasion Harry had even been savagely beaten on top of the 'usual' slaps, kicks and insults just like young Snape. The Boy-Who-Lived didn't fall into the Dark Arts. He'd not perpetrated the horrific acts of torture and maiming that Snape had gleefully enacted on the innocent.

Severus Snape lived his entire life for himself. He only cared what he could get out of any situation. He pursued Lily Evans for how happy she made him feel, not for how he could make her feel happy. He fought against Voldemort, for vengeance, not because it was the right thing to do. He became one of the most highly respected Potioneers in Europe because he wanted the fame and respect, not for a love of the art. Every action in his life was motivated by self interest. Not once in his pathetic life, did Severus Snape willingly give of himself to anyone, any cause or any organization. Never.

Harry Potter was the complete antithesis of Severus Snape. Harry willingly gave of himself to those about him. Only once in his life had he acted out of self motivation, but even then, he had left Hogwarts that fateful night to protect Hermione more than himself.

By a cruel and ironic twist of fate, they'd had nearly similar upbringings, but the choices made by Harry lifted him into the light, while Severus sank into the dark. Dumbledore had been right all those years ago, it truly was our choices which define us.

Snape had made his choice and it showed up in all his behaviour, large and small. The man bullied children. He abused, castigated and betrayed them on a regular basis. Snape had made his choice.

"Harry, what happened?" Hermione repeated.

Blinking away the memories, Harry explained Snape's role in Voldemort becoming aware of the Prophecy which linked Harry Potter to Tom Riddle. When he finished his recounting, Hermione and Remus began to advance on Snape, the intention to do him significant harm was written plainly on their faces.

"Wait," Minerva called in a commanding tone.

The other four turned to her expectantly, the question painted across their expression: Why shouldn't we kill him now?

Her face hardening to near ferocity, she glared at each, making them back down. When the four younger members of the family were suitably cowed Minerva told them, "Have none of you realized that Albus let Severus leave the Hogshead after he'd heard part of the Prophecy?"

Thunderstruck, they all stared at Minerva. Remus fell into a chair, all his illusions of Dumbledore shattered.

"He left me in prison, didn't he?" Sirius wondered aloud. "He was the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. He knew I didn't have a trial but never ordered one conducted. Barty Crouch be damned, Albus could have ordered one."

Minerva had realized this and many other unsavoury behaviours of the esteemed Headmaster of Hogwarts. Nodding sharply, she agreed with Sirius' speculation. Turning to Harry she elaborated, "His placement of you with your aunt and uncle is suspect, to say the least. He may have had some good intentions in placing you there. The blood wards may truly protect you, I don't know. But I also know that when you showed up here for your sorting, you would do anything to keep you away from Surrey and you looked to Albus as a saviour." She paused; "I don't know if he intentionally sent you there for your spirit to be broken, but..." she trailed off, her deduction plain.

Everyone looked at the odious former Death Eater, unconscious and bound to the chair. A flash of insight filled Hermione's mind. Snape was a pawn. First he was a pawn of Voldemort and later a pawn of Dumbledore. A disgusting, morally repugnant pawn, but a pawn nonetheless.

Waving Sirius to the side, Hermione pulled a chair so she could sit across from the bound man. Harry was by far stronger in the Mind Arts, but Hermione had a more delicate touch for fine work. "Love," she told Harry, "I'm going to be going at this for a while. Could you get a Pepper Up for me?"

Nodding, Harry wrapped his cloak about his shoulders and hurried back to Remus' quarters. Don't need to run today, I've run nearly three miles so far tonight.

.oOo.

By the time Hermione had finished removing the memories of being beaten and added memories of a quiet night in his rooms, she was ready to pass out. Downing the Pepper Up potion, she sighed as the tiredness faded alongside the steam pouring from her ears.

Minerva Disillusioned herself before levitating Snape into his quarters. She came back a few minutes later, evaluating the younger members of her family.

Harry and Hermione were clinging to each other as they sat on a conjured loveseat. Remus sat on the edge of a chair, his head in his hands. Sirius paced back and forth from corner to corner. Eventually,

Padfoot stilled. Minerva caught his eye and waited. Eventually, Sirius nodded in resignation.

"We need to move forward," Harry muttered from his embrace with Hermione. "We should publicly turn in Pettigrew tomorrow. Sirius deserves to be cleared."

"I agree," Hermione chimed in. Remus nodded as did Minerva. Sirius stared at Harry, the challenge clear on his face.

Hermione rolled her eyes, "Sirius..." she said to get his attention. When he didn't break his stare from Harry, Hermione huffed, hit him with a Stinging hex on the arm before repeating, "Sirius. You're not going to kill him."

Scowling and rubbing his arm, he spat, "Why not?"

"Because I need you," Harry replied for his wife. Indicating the others in the room, he continued, "We all need you and you'll completely lose your mind if you're on the run."

"He deserves to die."

Annoyed now, Harry stood and jabbed his finger at his godfather, "No shit, he deserves to die. He betrayed me and my parents. My parents are dead because of his betrayal."

Sirius flinched at Harry's words, but The Boy-Who-Lived was remorseless and ploughed on. "If I can let go of my need for revenge, then you can too. Damn you, Padfoot! Are you going to make the same mistakes again! Stop thinking only about yourself!"

"Alright," Sirius sighed as he sat down. "Jesus, what a night. What time is it?"

"Two AM," Remus replied.

"Let's all get some sleep," Minerva counselled. "We'll take care of Peter tomorrow, I've an idea how we can carry this out."

.oOo.

SIRIUS BLACK INNOCENT; PETTIGREW THE BETRAYER

In a stunning turn of events, it has been discovered that Peter Pettigrew, Order of Merlin Third Class Awardee, was the Potters' secret keeper so long ago. It was Pettigrew who sold the Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter and his Lady to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Professor Minerva McGonagall brought the treacherous Pettigrew to Director of Magical Law Enforcement Amelia Bones' office early yesterday morning.

In a press release, Director Bones had the following to say: "Professor McGonagall appeared in my offices this morning with a man stunned and bound in tow. He has since been identified as one Peter Charles Pettigrew. After questioning under the influence of Veritaserum, he was arrested and charged with multiple homicides, conspiracy to commit murder, sedition and many other charges. The man bears the Dark Mark of [He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named]."

Professor McGonagall related to this reporter that, "I was heading to Hogsmeade to make some purchases when I was accosted by Sirius Black." The Professor was well past the line of Dementors which were encircling the school at that time. "Black tossed his wand to the ground before placing his hands in the air. I was surprised, but immediately Summoned his wand. Before I had the chance to bind him, he begged me to listen to his story. Being cautious, I bound him but listened to his tale.

"He told me that Peter Pettigrew was the betrayer of James and Lily Potter and that the man was an animagus. A rat animagus to be specific. I immediately thought of one of my Gryffindors who has a rat for a companion. Black told me that he'd seen a picture of Pettigrew with the boy which drove him to escape from Azkaban in order to protect his godson, Harry Potter.

"Deciding that time was of the essence, I Stunned Black and took him back to the Castle. There was a bit of a tussle with the Dementors at the gates, but I've long been proficient with the Patronus charm. Once in the castle, I placed him under the care of Professor Flitwick before proceeding to Gryffindor Tower. There I found the rat, verified he was an animagus and brought him to Director Bones. I believe she immediately cancelled the search for Black, signed a writ proclaiming his innocence and is actively looking to see to his compensation for wrongs done to him over the course of his twelve long years of imprisonment."

It should be noted that Sirius Black was a Gryffindor when he attended Hogwarts (1972-1979) and Professor McGonagall was his head of House. Director Bones has intimated that Professor McGonagall is being submitted for an Order of Merlin Second Class. As of print time, Harry Potter was unavailable for comment.

According to Director Bones, all Dementors have been removed from the greater Hogwarts area, having been sent back to the North Sea to guard Azkaban.

For a biography of Minerva McGonagall, Head of Gryffindor House, Mistress of Transfiguration and Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts, see page 7

For a biography of Sirius Black, Lord Black and head of the Ancient and Noble house of Black, see page 9.

"Minerva can lie really well, can't she?"

Hermione smiled at her husband. They were lying in bed in the master suite at Rowan Hill. It wasn't a Hogsmeade weekend, yet, but they had all their work done through the end of the term so they thought they'd investigate the home about which Sirius and Remus had told them so much. They'd fallen in love with the grounds, the view of the mountains, the sea – all of it. The veranda of the main house overlooked an expansive garden tended by two house elves. Harry had to smile when he met Rauri and Madi. He'd never seen elves so moved or heard them speak with a Welsh lilt.

The front of the house was set a quarter mile from cliffs, in which was a set of stairs led to a beach on Cardigan Bay.

"It's like we're in a dream," Harry had commented as they entered the house. The house itself was massive and ornate but had a distinct 'home' feel about it. The few portraits of former heads of House Potter gave credence to the distinctive Potter trait of dark hair, lean build and 'sexy smiles'. Or at least that's what Hermione had said.

Upon arriving at the estate in Wales, they'd found Sirius dancing his way through the kitchen wearing a 'Kiss the Cook' apron while dirtying every pan the Potters owned. They owned a lot of pans. "I'm

cooking a meal for myself," he shouted. "I dreamt of shepherd's pie with Guinness for a dozen years and by god I'm going to have one!" The wireless was turned up to window rattling levels as Led Zeppelin shook the Houses of the Holy.

The first thing Sirius did as a free man (after cleaning up the kitchen and downing his meal) was to go the WIZARDING Office of Child Services and begin the process of gaining custody of Harry. They all knew it would be a legal fiction, but Harry was touched, nonetheless. In fact, Sirius had apparated away from Rowan Hill an hour ago to present the Dursleys with the solution to all their problems. They could relinquish Harry's guardianship with a few signatures.

"This'll get Dumbledore's back up," Hermione observed.

Harry nodded. The wards on Privet Drive would fall – probably immediately – and Dumbledore would be alerted by one of the various gadgets in his office.

"Screw him. I'm very rapidly tiring of tip-toeing around him and his sensibilities. But at the same time..."

Hermione rolled her eyes before she hiked her leg over her husband's waist and sat up, straddling him. "I know. You want him to come to our side. Look, you need to be careful. He can seriously derail us, so you better play nice," she wiggled a little to emphasize the point.

"Wench." He glanced at the clock which he couldn't see as his spectacles were somewhere on the floor. He asked, "How much time 'til we're due back?"

Leaning down to kiss him, she murmured, "Enough time."

.oOo.

The summons came at dinner the next evening.

Holding the note up, Harry murmured, "Dumbledore wants to see me in his office after dinner."

Hermione's face was set in a determined expression. She wasn't bidden to the meeting and her presence would be made much of by

the Headmaster if she showed up uninvited. Narrowing her eyes, she coached her husband, "Keep your temper. You don't know anything about anything, remember?"

He nodded, collecting himself. Hermione squeezed his shoulder before she thought of something, "Minerva."

"What about her?"

"Ask her to accompany you as your head of house. He can't do anything outrageous if she's there."

He nodded before looking to the staff table. Catching the Transfiguration Professor's eye, he nodded to the note in his hand. Understanding his meaning, she quickly finished her meal before wiping her mouth with her napkin and standing.

Stopping at Harry's spot, she told him, "Come along Mr Potter."

He too wiped his mouth, gave Hermione's hand a last squeeze and followed his teacher. Once they left the Great Hall, she asked, "Albus?"

"Yeah. I've no idea what he wants, do you?"

"Hopefully, it's merely a discussion about Sirius. To his knowledge," she reminded her charge, "You've never met your godfather."

"Hmm, right."

Shortly, they stood before the Gargoyle blocking the Headmaster's staircase. "Tootsie Roll," Minerva replied to the unspoken challenge for password. Shaking her head at Dumbledore's penchant for confections, she preceded Harry up the stairs.

Not bothering with the pretence of knocking, Minerva opened the door and strode in to the lavish office of the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

"Ah, Minerva, Harry, so good to see you this fine evening. Lemon Drop?" One had to pay special close attention to see that the wily old Headmaster had been thrown slightly off his game by the appearance of his Deputy.

Not trusting what else the sweet may have been covered with, Harry politely declined. The green eyed seeker intentionally focused all his attention on the ring that gathered Dumbledore's beard just about the same level as the man's heart. It was doubtful that eye contact was required for such a powerful Legilimancer as Dumbledore to skim his target's surface thoughts, but Harry wasn't taking chances. Maybe I'm being paranoid, but I don't want the old man wondering why and when I developed Occlumetic shields.

Settling next to Minerva on a comfortable chair, Harry decided to be meek and mild. "You wished to see me Headmaster?" he asked in a near whisper.

Dumbledore's expression became serious. Pursing his lips, the old man began, "I regret the manner in which you learned the entire truth regarding your parents' betrayal and death, Harry. I wished to spare you the unpleasant story, but in hindsight, I should have been more forthcoming. I'm sure it was quite a shock to read all about it on the front page of the Daily Prophet."

Harry shrugged before looking at his feet. Unbidden, he wondered if he could replace his tatty trainers with new ones without it being noticed. Mentally shaking himself, he paid attention to Dumbledore.

"Nevertheless, I am sorry," Dumbledore replied to Harry's unspoken 'It's alright'. "I wished to discuss another matter with you as well this evening and that is to do with your residence when you leave Hogwarts in the summer upcoming."

Instinctively frowning at the topic, Harry sat silently.

"I'm afraid you must return to your relatives, Harry."

"But Sirius is my godfather. He's the one my parents wanted to take care of me should the worst happen." Which did happen, he added silently.

Nodding his acquiescence at the point, Dumbledore admitted, "True enough. But there are very good reasons why you should continue to live with your aunt and uncle."

When Dumbledore didn't continue, Minerva asked, "And those reasons are?"

Surprised at her question, Dumbledore didn't reply other than to say, "You know very well what those reasons are, Minerva."

"Yes I do, but young Harry does not. I was not asking for my own edification, but rather for his."

His bushy brows beetling, Dumbledore opened his mouth to decline to answer when Harry interjected, "Please, Professor. I have the right to know."

This was Dumbledore's last chance before Harry gave up on him. 'Before', the Headmaster had done unconscionable things during Harry's fourth and fifth years. Granted, Dumbledore was already guilty of a list of crimes as long as Harry's arm, but Harry was giving the man one last chance.

"There are wards which protect you at Privet Drive, Harry. They are blood wards which are powered by your mother's sacrifice. So long as you live with someone of her blood, Voldemort cannot touch you there."

Harry nodded his head. Stunned that the Headmaster had actually answered honestly, Harry was lost as to what to do about the man. Pushing the matter aside, he asked, "What about his Death Eaters. Can they find me there?"

A slight tic next to Dumbledore's eye gave him away. "No one who wishes to cause you harm can find you whilst you reside with your aunt and uncle."

Without thinking, The Boy-Who-Lived replied, "But my uncle and cousin beat me regularly. How does that happen?"

Dumbledore noticeably paled under his snowy white beard. "That is because it is from them that the ward is powered."

His hopes for working with Dumbledore dashed, Harry sighed loudly for the Headmaster was lying again. "My uncle is of no blood relation to my mother, Headmaster," Harry observed in a defeated tone. The time traveling teen was looking into his lap, trying to hold back tears

of frustration. Dumbledore would have been such an asset. Between his immense magical ability, his incredibly powerful positions that he held in the Magical World and his force of personality, he would have been of inestimable value to the eradication of Lord Voldemort.. But like Snape, Albus Dumbledore also made choices. Choices that Harry hadn't wanted to believe would be repeated.

He'd hoped that he and Hermione had been wrong for all those years. He'd hoped that his gut was in error when it screamed that Dumbledore would walk over anyone in the pursuit of what he believed to be right.

In the end, though, Harry and Hermione had been right. Dumbledore may have cared for those about him, but not enough to put them first. His vision of the correct path ahead always came first.

Maybe the first time through his third year, Harry mightn't have picked up on the Headmaster's deceit or the error in logic. Maybe Dumbledore was counting on Harry not being quick or attentive enough to catch the detail. Unfortunately for all in the room, Harry did catch it and did call it to everyone's attention.

When Dumbledore didn't reply to Harry's observation, Harry sighed. "Thank you for your efforts, sir. I'll consider your input come the end of the year."

Not liking the sound of Harry's words, Dumbledore countered, "Harry, I must insist..." but was cut off by a hiss from Harry's right.

Harry turned to see the fiercest expression on Minerva McGonagall's face he'd ever seen. His imagination smeared the blue war paint worn by ancient Scots into battle across her cheekbones and forehead as Minerva glared at Dumbledore. It was the first time he'd ever truly feared his friend.

"Mr Potter, return to the Tower. I need to have a discussion with the Headmaster."

Suitably impressed and quite ready to leave, Harry popped to his feet, muttered, "Good evening Headmaster, Professor McGonagall," before nearly running for the door.

.oOo.

Harry couldn't find Hermione in the common room. "Nev, you seen Hermione?"

"Yeah, she's meeting with Luna in the library about something."

"Ah," Harry muttered. Remembering that this evening was when Luna and Hermione met to practice Occlumency, he plopped down on the sofa next to Neville.

"So, what did the Headmaster want?" Neville asked.

Shaking his head, Harry summed up, "He wanted to apologize for not telling me about Sirius Black earlier and also tell me I should go back to live with my magic hating aunt and uncle."

Thoroughly confused, Neville asked, "Why?"

"Apparently there are wards that keep Voldemort from getting to me. Unfortunately, it doesn't keep my uncle and cousin off me."

"Oh."

At this point Hermione entered via the portrait hole, a pensive expression on her face. Seeing Harry next to Neville, her face brightened as she hurried to her husband's side.

"So?" she asked with trepidation alongside anticipation.

He sighed and it was answer enough for her. "He apologized for not telling me about the secret keeper situation before it showed up in the paper, even if he had it wrong. Then he told me I need to go back to the Dursley's come summer."

Hermione couldn't help herself, she snorted in disgust. "Never going to happen," she muttered. She ran her hand absently through the hair on the back of his head. It always calmed him. After they'd married and settled in Cornwall, she'd teased him about it being Pavlovian.

Harry didn't want to go into specifics about Dumbledore's deceptions with Neville actively listening to the conversation. Opting for physical comfort in lieu of words, Harry pulled Hermione into his lap before

burying his face in her hair. Breathing deeply, he calmed even further.

The Smartest Witch of the Age wrapped both arms about the neck of The Boy-Who-Lived, pulling him close. Taking the hint, Neville murmured, "See you all in the morning."

"Night Neville."

As the third year boy headed for the staircase of the boys' dorm, Hermione whispered, "What else?"

In an undertone, Harry related the rest of the story. At the end, they both let out a disappointed sigh at the Headmaster's behaviour. Unexpectedly, Hermione chuckled.

"What?" he asked.

"I'd have paid good gold to be a fly on the wall when Minerva was giving him what for."

Smiling, Harry ducked his head into her tresses again. "I don't know, she was pretty terrifying."

.oOo.

After Transfiguration the next day, they loitered behind the rest of the crowd. Ron was the last student to leave as he drifted aimlessly out the door calling, "Seamus! Wait up!" Harry and Hermione looked to Minerva with expectant expressions.

With a quick wave of her wand, Minerva warded the room and locked the door. "So...?" Harry prompted, a wicked grin on his face now.

With a faint blush, Minerva told them, "Albus and I had a discussion."

Hermione rolled her eyes, "Oh please, Minerva. Harry showed me the memory. I'm surprised you weren't screaming in Gaelic while you attacked him with a targe and dirk."

The blush was a bit more evident as she relented and explained, "I told Albus, in fairly forceful terms, that I'd warned him against placing Harry with his relatives and that he'd ignored me. I also pointed out his glaring personality defect of being unwilling to take others' counsel."

"At a very high volume?" Harry asked with a mischievous grin.

Looking at her desk for a moment, she admitted, "I may have raised my voice a bit."

Settling down a bit, Hermione asked in a serious tone, "How'd it go?"

Frowning as she shook her head, Minerva replied, "Not well. He readily admitted that he could have done more to ensure your," she nodded at Harry, "Well being while under your relatives dubious care. He never admitted that he ought never to have placed you there, though. Quite the opposite, he insisted that Harry must return to Privet Drive come the end of the school year."

The only response from the teens was mutual disbelief at the old man's intransigence. They'd deal with Dumbledore's issues regarding Harry's living conditions when the time came. They had far more important issues in front of them.

.oOo.

For the first time in years, Halloween passed without a significant event that caused mayhem, death or destruction.

.oOo.

For two weeks after the assault and memory modification on Severus Snape, there was nothing amiss. In short, he was as unpleasant as usual, but there were no suspicious looks. He didn't conduct any spontaneous Legilimancy attacks or anything else that would tip off the Family that he was aware of the tampering which had been done to his memories. Harry began to hope that he and Hermione had effectively modified the man's memory.

He knew that in the short run, the man was an annoyance. Those of the family knew full well that Harry or Hermione could defeat the Potions Master in a duel. In the long run, though, there are few

people on the planet who can hold a grudge like Severus Snape. His picture is next to the word 'vindictive' in the OED.

Harry and Hermione tried to live a semi-normal life, despite being sensitive to Snape's mood. They went to classes (which were dead dull), worked on their animagus transformation, practised duelling with Remus and Sirius but most of all, they savoured the time with Moony, Padfoot and Minerva.

Since Malfoy had no incident with Buckbeak at the beginning of the year, the Gryffindor/Slytherin match went off first as scheduled. It wasn't even close. With Oliver at the top of his game, The Girls weaving a tapestry as the Twins joyfully created mayhem, Harry dominated Malfoy. Ploughing the lad once on a Wronski Feint and one time sending the boy headfirst into the stands. Harry liked to call it a 'Horizontal Wronski Feint'. Oliver called it The Potter Plough.

Amusingly enough, Draco had ploughed his own father. Not that Harry had intended that in the least. He'd actually been aiming for Snape, but Draco was so incompetent that he couldn't even fly straight. It was a shutout; 340-0 in Gryffindor's favour.

It was the aftermath of this first Quidditch match of the season when there was a definitive sign that the Potions Master suspected something as Snape accosted Harry outside the changing rooms.

Grabbing Harry by the shoulder, he pushed The Boy-Who-Lived against the wall. Snarling into Harry's face, Snape stared into Harry's eyes. "I know you did something Potter," he growled while attacking Harry's Occlumatic shields.

Harry had to resist laughing. Wandless, incantation less Legilimancy is effective enough against a defenceless third year, but was the same as pissing on an erupting volcano to a Master Occlumencer. Little did Severus know that Harry was a Master Occlumencer.

When Harry's only reaction to the mental attack was an expression of mild curiosity, Snape slid his hand from Harry's shoulder to his neck and began to slowly choke the Gryffindor Seeker.

This was far beyond anything they'd ever envisioned Snape doing. Something very significant had to have happened for the master of control, Severus Snape, to lose said control of himself.

Was it Pettigrew being turned in as a Death Eater? Snape had to have known that Peter was a Death Eater and in turn, Peter would know that Severus was a Death Eater. Wormtail might even testify that Snape set Voldemort on the trail of the Potters. Unlikely, but possible.

Also, the other half of the most hated duo had just been publicly exonerated. With James Potter dead, the focus of Severus Snape's ire was focused on Sirius Black and Remus Lupin. Of the two, Sirius was far more offensive to Snape. With Sirius publicly justified, Snape's long held private gloating over a man he knew to be innocent was dashed to flinders. Snape had known that Sirius was not a Death Eater. As Voldemort's spy and personal brewer, Severus Snape had access to the Dark Lord and his minions that few outside of the Lestrage, Malfoy and Nott families had. He had known that Sirius was innocent and revelled in the fact that one of the primary tormentors from his school years was being viciously punished for a crime which he didn't commit. For the object of those bitter reveries to be cleared had to enrage the sour man.

All that wasn't important at the moment, though, as Harry was being choked. Not finding the situation amusing any longer, Harry moved to shift the Greasy Git's hand from his throat. With his hand moving in a punch that would most likely dislocate Snape's elbow, Harry's attacker was suddenly plucked off the young man to be thrown back a few feet.

Surprised, Harry watched Fred and George dust off their hands. "You alright mate?"

Harry smiled and stifled a laugh. "Yeah, thanks lads. I think he's just pissed that we trounced his boys."

"You two!" Snape spat as he clambered to his feet. "Detention for a month! Five hundred points from Gryffindor and come with me to the Headmaster's office!"

In a bored tone, Fred replied, "Sure. I'd love to see your explanation for physically assaulting Mr Potter here."

"Indeed brother. That would be a sight to see." Turning to Snape with false bonhomie, he asked, "Shall we?"

Snape's face twisted with real hatred. His normally jaundiced eyes burned red as he glared at the three students. Without any further comment, the Potions master spun on his heel and stormed off.

The three Gryffindors watched him go with real concern. "Lads," Harry began, "He'll be coming for you now, you know that. Not points or detentions. He'll be trying to hurt you." Maybe even kill you.

"Yep," replied Fred. "But what were we going to do? Let him kill you?"

There was a long moment of silence as they all contemplated the situation. Two light bulbs went off for Harry so he beckoned to the Twins, "Let's talk to McGonagall. She may be able to help."

He hooked an arm across each of the Twins' shoulders, "Oh, yeah. My godfather, Sirius Black? He's Padfoot."

The squeals from the Twins could be heard in Hogsmeade.

.oOo.

Where Hermione began to token far more quickly for her animagus change, Harry still only had his oak leaf in his box under their bed. Hermione had told her boyfriend/husband/best friend about her talk with Remus and the aftereffects.

"I've never felt freer," she related. It was late at night ant they were cuddled in bed.

Harry scrunched his face before replying, "I'm not really comfortable talking about those kind of things."

In their original third year, Hermione would have lost her temper and told Harry, "No one is comfortable with those things, stop being a baby and go talk to someone!" Fortunately, she'd matured. She also recognized that between ten years of war, an extraordinarily abusive childhood and a complete lack of anything resembling a social life, Harry was a damaged individual. As such, he didn't express himself well outside of his tightknit family. Even then, the only person with whom he let down his entire guard was Hermione.

"Love, I understand. I was incredibly nervous when I approached Remus. He's the most mild mannered, open minded person I've ever known and yet I was still all pins and needles." Wrapping her arms around him, she snuggled into his chest.

After a few minutes in comfortable silence, she said, "There's a way that you may be able to look at this and not be so intimidated."

"I'm not intimidated," Harry replied instantly.

Rolling her eyes in the dark, Hermione mocked, "Sure you're not, love. Anyway, as I was saying. You know how you always get a spell when it's life and death?"

He smiled, "Like the Summoning charm?"

"Or the Patronus charm, yes. Look at this like that. Babe, this is going to eat you up unless you deal with the feelings and memories. I know. It was eating me alive. It was a millstone hung about my neck which held me down and was slowly souring me like old milk." She shivered at the memory. "I didn't even know how bad it was until I got it all off my chest."

Hermione was trying very hard to stay low key about the entire affair all the while impressing upon Harry the necessity and even urgency of the task. This was an issue far beyond the animagus transformation. His nightmares were becoming worse, even with them sharing a bed every night where hers had completely abated.

She left her urgings lie at this stage. Hooking her leg over his knees she pulled him close. A gentle kiss on the shoulder preceded her whisper soft, "I love you. No matter what, I'll always love you. So will they."

He pulled her close. Tightly binding her to him, he used her as a physical anchor for the frenzy of emotions within his heart.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn't refused nor temporized. He would talk to someone soon.

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to all who reviewed the first three chapters. Story status can always be found on my Author's page on FanFiction (dot) net.

2. Recommendation for the chapter is Harry Potter and Future's Past by Driftwood1965. It's one of the best takes on Reptilla's challenge. If you haven't read it, take the time.

3. Many thanks to brigrove for his review of chapter 3. He pointed out that the use of the term 'tabling' has opposite meanings to Americans and Britons. To an American, to table an item is to put it off to a future date. To a Briton, it means to deal with it immediately. I was unaware as to the two meanings so, as I'm an American, I meant that the group had decided to postpone the discussion. Thanks brigrove! My apologies to those who were confused, I strive for authenticity, but don't always succeed.

4. I'm not really nice to Snape in this chapter for a very good reason. The man is an abuser, a bully and a punk. The rest is explained in the chapter. That he and Dumbledore claimed to be fighting for the Light in canon is a joke. If you don't agree, that's fine. You don't have to agree with me. It's my opinion and evaluation. You know what they say about opinions, everyone has one...

Chapter 5

"Professor McGonagall, do you have a few moments?"

Hermione regarded Harry with surprise, but gave his hand a squeeze before muttering, "I'll be in Remus' rooms."

He nodded to his wife before turning back to Minerva. The door shut, leaving the two alone. "Your office?" he prompted.

Nodding silently, Minerva headed into her office. Instead of sitting in her usual position behind her desk, she moved to the straight backed chair. – with arms on it no less. Before he sat, Harry reached into a charmed pocket, withdrew a bottle and set it on the table, conjuring glasses to go with it.

Minerva cocked an eyebrow, "Harry, why do we need Irish whiskey?"

Snorting in amusement, Harry opened the bottle. "Jameson is a respectable whiskey, Minerva. Don't tell me that you're a whiskey snob." Pouring a generous three fingers for each of them, he saluted her before drinking it down.

She didn't drink, just waited for his explanation. Leaning forward while resting his elbows on his knees, Harry told her, "Min, I need to talk. Would you be willing to listen?"

Swallowing back emotion, she replied, "I'd be honoured to hear what you have to say, Harry."

Then she drank her whiskey.

Harry was silent for a long time. Minerva waited patiently until she realized his problem. Softly, she prompted, "Tell me about the first man you killed."

Rolling his eyes, Harry replied, "His name was Quirinus Quirrel. I think you've met him."

She waited.

The sarcastic humour drained out of his face before he drank off another shot of whiskey. "I don't know his name," he told her in a near whisper. Studying the glass in his hands, he continued, "I don't know most of their names. He was big, maybe six foot six, blonde hair and beefy. I decapitated him with a Cutter."

Looking out the window, he mused, "There was so much blood. I froze. It was nothing like when I killed Quirrel during first year. Back then I was a thoroughly confused firstie. Hell, I barely remember it. The fact that I'd killed a man didn't even sink in until the middle of second year and by then the 'Heir of Slytherin' thing was in full swing." Shaking his head at the memory, he mused, "Why didn't Dumbledore address that? He knew I wasn't the heir. One announcement at dinner and the whole school would have been off my tits. And while I'm at it, why did he send me back to Surrey with a pat on my head and a bunch of platitudes after the Stone?" He sighed, "But that's not why I'm here."

"It was after we'd left Cardiff and reunited with you, Arthur, Alastor and Filius. We were going on a supply raid. Half of our ops were for necessities at that point. Food and medicines were high on the priority list. Anyway, we were hitting a supply depot outside Leeds that Alastor had been watching. We jumped just after zero two hundred, mass Apparating to the back of the depot. A quick Severing charm and the wire parted. We'd picked this one since they didn't have any wards. That should have tipped us off, though."

"We'd just filled a series of bottomless bags when all hell broke loose. There were at least a dozen Death Eaters, fortunately most were morons. This big guy was up front and before I knew it, I snap cast a Cutting curse that relieved him of his head." He stared for a long moment, fully immersed in the memory.

Hollowly, he told her, "His neck fountained blood over me and you. Did you know that blood smells? It gets sticky too." Shaking off the memory, he refocused, "I didn't scream or anything, I just stood there as the enormity of what I'd just done hit me. Then Hermione shielded for me and I got into it. Four more fell that night..."

"I killed a lot of men and women in similar situations. Supply raids, assassinations – you're pretty damn good on the long range shot with the Piercing charm – and the extractions. Good Lord, we must

have smuggled a hundred people out via the Chunnel before Lucius Malfoy got smart and had it warded it to hell and back.

"The worst were the ones we couldn't save in time. Arthur found Lavender Brown in an Entertainment House in the middle of February. The house was empty save for her. She was nearly catatonic; seven months along with child, obviously by rape, beaten so badly that her bone structure was permanently altered. There was a mild recognition in her eyes when she saw you, me and Hermione. The only thing she would say for days was 'Kill me'."

The first tear fell down his cheek. "After two weeks, I gave her what she asked. I buried her in the heather up there," he indicated with his chin to the north of the school.

Minerva poured the next round.

"When I found out that Remus had been killed and how he'd died, I went crazy. I left Grimmauld Place in the middle of the night all alone. Moody was so angry. Not that I went, but that I went alone." Rolling his eyes at the old warrior's priorities, Harry continued. "Pure dumb luck allowed me to bump into Greyback. I was walking down the street and there he was. It was the first time I cast the Killing curse."

Scrubbing his face in shame, he added, "The other time was when I thought Hermione had been killed." He paused, swallowed twice before explaining. "She and I were doing reconnaissance on a rail yard in Birmingham. It was a major rail centre for the Death Eaters to move muggleborns to the camps. The camps that Snape ran," he hissed.

"Anyway, she was doing the ward diagnostics while I prowled on overwatch. A fairly piss-poor job I did, too. I was working back and forth in a semi circle with her in the centre. Somehow, a Death Eater got at her from the opposite side from me. He hit her with a horrible curse which began to slowly consume her magic. Her screams still haunt me in my nightmares."

Another tear ran down his cheek.

"When I killed Greyback, I didn't even think. My arm was moving, the hatred was flowing and my mouth shouted, 'Avada Kedavra.' It wasn't pre-planned at all, it just happened. With this fuck, I meant it.

I Bludgeoned him twice in the ribs, broke both his legs and hit him with the Entrail Expelling curse. It took maybe two seconds before the bastard was laying in the dirt, bleeding his life away. As he lay there moaning and trying to stuff his guts back in his belly, I stood over him, pointed my wand between his eyes, caught his attention and told him I was going to kill him. After I saw recognition in his eyes, only then did I cast." Choking on his self-revulsion, Harry finished, "I got Hermione out of there and back to you and Mad-Eye. She took a few weeks to recover, but got there in the end."

Minerva was silent, but she did reach over to place her hand on his shoulder. "Thank you," he croaked to her unspoken reassurance.

"The night I killed Greyback wasn't my first Unforgivable. When Sirius was killed I tried to use the Cruciatus on Bellatrix LeStrange. I hadn't the slightest idea what I was doing so it didn't really do anything. I had enough hatred to power that curse for Greyback, though." Narrowing his eyes, he said, "I've never told anyone any of this."

"You should tell Hermione," Minerva directed.

Softly he shook his head in negation before she interrupted his response. "Harry, you should tell your wife." When he looked at her as if she were daft, Minerva explained, "For your sake, not hers. Good heavens, you could vivisect the Archbishop of Canterbury and she'd still love you. It's the secret that you hold, that's the problem. You can't have a secret from her."

"I can't tell her."

"You must."

"Why?" he asked in a shrill, terrified voice.

"Because it will destroy you if you don't. It will tear your marriage apart. You both deserve better. Tell her." This was pure Minerva; firm, caring, unyielding and yet loving. Only a select few had the opportunity to know her at this basic level.

Shakily, he nodded his acquiescence. "The one I always dream about is when Hermione was killed. We were just going to the grocers, you know. Grab some beans and peas. Our area of

Cornwall was pretty sparsely inhabited and most of us had significant kitchen gardens. The canned goods we scrounged were because we got lazy every once in a while. I had just put a can of artichoke hearts in the bag when they showed up. I got five of them. I suppose she got the other two." With a rueful shake of his head, he muttered, "I even made a joke about she was getting slower in her old age. When I turned around, I saw her on the floor, eyes wide open..." he broke off as soundless sobs wracked his form.

Slowly, Minerva rose from her chair and knelt in front of her charge as she took him in her arms. It was the first time she'd embraced anyone since her Jamie had been killed. It was the first time, but not the last by far.

.oOo.

It was nearly midnight when he crawled into their bed in the third year boys' dormitory. Half asleep, she shifted to take him in her arms. As he lay his head on the pillow and wrapped his arms around his love, she whispered, "I love you."

"I love you, too."

.oOo.

Hermione had decided to very publicly lay claim to Harry. She'd rummaged in his trunk for a full five minutes before she found that which she'd been looking. Muttering, 'You're a slob, dear,' she pulled his Gryffindor Quidditch Jersey over her head.

Since she was Disillusioned at the time, Harry found the effect quite odd.

Nevertheless, after he'd showered and dressed he met up with his clean and fully dressed better half in the common room. She was still wearing his jersey as it was Saturday.

His mouth slightly agape, he murmured, "You look incredibly hot in that."

She smiled and mock preened for a bit. Both of them yawned at the same time before she tugged on his arm. "Come on, let's eat before we go back to bed and sleep 'til noon."

Harry and Hermione were groggily eating their breakfast. On top of their late night, they were emotionally exhausted; Harry from his soul baring heart-to-heart with Minerva, Hermione from fretting about Harry while she waited for him to get back.

Remus strolled into the Great Hall, whistling an old Royal Navy tune. Seeing his friends/students, he changed course to the Gryffindor table. Dropping the morning Daily Prophet on the table, he raised his eyebrows in amusement before he continued on to the Head Table.

HOGWARTS PROFESSOR ASSAULTS BOY-WHO-LIVED
screamed at the couple from the front page.

Harry and Hermione were now fully awake.

"How...?" Hermione asked. Before Harry could reply, they both slowly turned to the Head Table. Remus was sitting in his chair, a smug smile dancing about the corners of his mouth.

Harry couldn't help himself. Consumed by laughter, he fell off the bench.

.oOo.

"I can't believe you did that!" Harry half laughed/half shouted. They were on the front lawn after a hastily eaten breakfast.

Remus smiled and shrugged, 'Who me?' written all over his face. "Actually," he replied, "I didn't." He paused, stretching out the punch line. "I told Padfoot."

"And he went running to Rita Skeeter," Hermione finished. Shaking her head, she paused, "Did you tell him anything else?"

His eyes twinkling to rival Dumbledore's, Moony of the Marauders sat on a bench, crossed his legs and adopted his best professorial pose. "I may have mentioned a few things."

With a wide grin, Harry prompted, "Give, Remus."

With a small smile, Moony elaborated, "We may have discussed Barty Crouch and his son, Dolores Umbridge and her penchant for

torture devices, Lucius Malfoy and a hidden chamber under his drawing room floor." Shaking his head in mock confusion, Moony whinged, "There's so much I believe I've lost track."

"You're not going to go to the DMLE..." Hermione observed in unabashed respect.

The smug smile in place, Moony nodded, "We're going to use Rita Skeeter as our stalking horse."

"You're a god," Harry joked. "Uncle Moony, when I grow up, can I be just like you?" Harry teased in a little boy voice.

Shaking his head, Moony replied, "As I told your father, young Harry, you're not nearly good looking enough."

They all dissolved in laughter. After a few minutes and regaining their composure, Remus observed, "Albus, Minerva and Severus are at a meeting with the Board of Governors, one of whom, I believe, is Amelia Bones." His eyes narrowing, Remus warned his young friend, "Expect to be asked for a statement sometime soon, the Twins as well. I doubt this will be swept under the rug. It's far too public and you're far too famous."

"Which was your and Padfoot's intent the entire time."

"Basically." Remus became serious for a moment then explained, "We can't just drop the whole mess on Amelia Bones and the DMLE. If we do, the corruption will easily cover up any misdeeds and crimes we bring to light. She's a good woman, but only one person. There are too many issues perpetrated by too many influential persons for her to deal with it on the QT. By using the Prophet and Skeeter as a stalking horse, we rally public opinion. If there's anything a politician is sensitive to, it's public opinion."

"And Skeeter is such a rumour monger, that she'll ensure all get crucified," Harry observed as he recollected her persecution of Hagrid in their original fourth year.

"Fudge will have to act. He'll have no choice. Was this your idea?" asked Hermione.

"Actually, it was Sirius'. Together we mapped out the gradual feeding of Skeeter information which she could then dig up more dirt before she went to print. This altercation with Severus was too juicy to pass by, though. It went to her first."

"What's next?" Harry asked.

"Probably Crouch and his son. That's the most tenuous situation. With Crouch being ousted from the Ministry after Sirius' clearing, he's in the most unstable situation. Then Umbridge. Fortunately, Malfoy can't move his goods fast enough to escape."

"Where is Sirius?" Harry asked as he sat and pulled Hermione into his lap.

"I think he's at Gringotts today. The Black Trust is as enormous as the Potter Trust, but is much more complicated in its disbursements and controls. He'll be at it for a week or so, at least. I don't envy him wading through forms and what not."

Hermione rolled her eyes but then noticed Minerva striding from the front doors. Poking Harry in the ribs, she motioned with her chin. Remus and Harry noticed the elder member of the family just as she reached hailing range.

"Professor," Harry greeted solemnly.

Not bothering to respond to Harry's greeting, Minerva drew her wand in order to cast a quick Privacy charm. "Severus was sacked and taken into custody. Amelia is going to charge him with assault, battery and anything else she can find. Also, she told me on the side that she's going to dig through the records to see if there are any residual charges that were not covered in his Albus sponsored pardon."

She looked at Harry with intent and he caught her meaning. Pulling a face, he told her, "I'd rather not think of what I saw in his mind, but if I can borrow your pensieve, we can sift through the memories either with or without Amelia. I'm fairly certain his original pardon didn't include use of the Unforgivables. Or murder. Or rape."

Tapping the bench on which she was sitting, Minerva was lost in thought. Eventually, she roused herself, mentioning, "I can't recall if

it did or not. I'll mention it to Amelia. If he can be prosecuted for the Unforgivables, there's no need to go ransacking through the more disgusting memories."

Exhaling a sigh of relief, Harry murmured, "Good." Hermione gave him a sad smile from his lap while she ran her fingers through his hair.

"What was the Headmaster's response to the whole affair?" The Smartest Witch of the Age asked.

Her eyes narrowing, Minerva replied, "Disapprobation of Amelia's action and the Prophet, primarily. He told Amelia that to arrest Severus on a suspicion without ever interviewing a witness was inappropriate. He said that Severus had done great things for the British Magical community and deserved better from its government."

"He said that Snape had done great things?" Harry asked in amazement. A quick nod from the grey haired Scot was all the answer he got.

"He's lost his fonging mind," Harry continued. Truly befuddled, he asked, "How can he say that?"

Her face hard, Minerva told him, "If what Albus says about Severus' spying for the Order during the last war is fact and not fancy, he's telling the truth that Severus has done our country a service."

"But that doesn't give him a free pass on his other monstrous acts," Hermione observed with a cold voice.

"No, it doesn't," Remus agreed in a surprisingly cold tone.

Winning the war with her anger, Minerva told Harry, "There are two Aurors in my office waiting to take your statement; the Weasley Twins' have already been interviewed."

Nodding, Harry and Hermione stood in tandem. Remus gave a short wave, muttering about grading third year essays and they all headed up the hill to the castle.

.oOo.

"Fong," Harry muttered as he walked in the Deputy Headmistress' office where Aurors Dawlish and Tonks were waiting for him. Dawlish had always been a prick and when the world went in the toilet face first, the spineless bastard had run. Last Harry had heard, Dawlish had made it to an island in the Pacific – the exact opposite side of the planet from Britain. "Pussy," Harry continued, sotto voce.

Apparently, it wasn't sotto voce enough. Tonks barked her braying laugh as Dawlish spun about, face purpling.

Adopting an expression of innocence that would have brought his father to tears of joy and pride, Harry asked the two law enforcement officers, "You wanted to see me?"

As Dawlish was currently incandescent with rage, Tonks replied for them both. "We needed to ask you a few questions about any altercations you may have had in the last few days."

Adopting a serious expression, Harry 'pondered' the situation for a moment. Finally, he looked up and asked Tonks, "Shouldn't my legal guardian be present?"

Dawlish started to answer, but Tonks cut him off. "Do you have a loco parentis form signed by your guardian that allows the Headmaster and the Deputy Head to act en loco parentis while you're here at Hogwarts?"

Harry snorted, "Not bloody likely."

Tonks smiled, "Well, I guess we'd best call my cousin, then."

"Cousin?" Dawlish responded as he blinked owlily. His upset had quickly been replaced with befuddlement. Tonks was his trainee and he wasn't used to trainees speaking, much less taking over an interview.

The fire roared green after Tonks tossed a pinch of Floo powder in it. A few moments later, Sirius Black in all his glory tumbled out of the fireplace. "Nymphy!" he bellowed jovially.

He moved approximately one step before his skin was green, he had tentacles sprouting out of his head and his outstretched hands had been transfigured into flippers.

Pulling a face that looked disturbingly like the gorgon, Sirius mumbled, "Sorry. Please, undo it."

With a smirk the Metamorphmagus Auror waved her wand, cancelling the charm and transfigurations. "Good to see you too, Sirius."

"Sirius Black is your cousin?" Dawlish asked suspiciously.

"Yeah," Tonks answered absently, giving Sirius an affectionate hug. Redirecting her attention to the animagus in her arms she warmly greeted him, "It's good to see you well, cousin."

"You too, Dora. It's been too damn long."

"Well, don't go to prison next time!" she mocked.

Shaking his head ruefully, Sirius jabbed, "I thought I was the only person in the family to make spectacularly inappropriate jokes."

"Nah, Dad is good for it too."

A warm expression on his face, Sirius asked, "So, why am i...here?" He trailed off as he put together the pieces of the puzzle. Harry and Minerva on one side of the room. Tonks and Dawlish on the other. The Aurors were in uniform.

A large Cheshire Cat smile spread across his face.

With a very 'Padfoot' expression, Sirius turned to Tonks and asked, "Why Auror Tonks, what business do we have to conduct this fine day?"

"We need to interview your godson and ward, my Lord Black."

"Really? Do tell."

The interview was very quick and to the point. Harry left out Snape's Legilimancy attack as he didn't want to explain how he defended it.

He downplayed the Twins' intervention, hoping to draw attention away from them in case the entire thing backfired on them. At one point, Dawlish interrupted Harry's recital. "You mean to tell me that you think that a Hogwarts Professor attacked you because his house lost a Quidditch match to your team?" The sarcasm was dripping from the man's words and the condescension palpable.

"No you blithering idiot," Sirius replied for his godson. "My godson said that he joked with Fred and George Weasley about that being the cause. Do you have operative ears? Excessive ear wax? I know a good potion to unclog those ear canals for you."

"Lord Black," Tonks admonished with a half smile dancing across her face.

Hiding his smirk behind a patently false expression of contrition, Sirius sighed. "My apologies Auror Tonks. Sometimes my mouth runs away."

"Shouldn't you track it down soon?" Harry asked with faux concern.

Minerva put an end to the shenanigans with one firm clearing of her throat.

"Right, so Mist'ers Weasley pulled the professor off you..." Tonks prompted Harry.

Finishing his story, he wound up with, "He gave the twins an excessive punishment considering they were defending me. Five hundred points and a month of detentions." Turning to Minerva, he asked, "I assume those detentions are cancelled and all points reinstated."

A nod was his only reply.

Tonks checked the dicta-quill to ensure that it had recorded the entire conversation; snide comments and all. Nodding her head in satisfaction, Tonks tapped the parchment with her wand to dry the ink, rolled up the record of the conversation before stuffing it in her pocket. Pulling it back out, she told Harry, "Mr Potter, you'll need to sign this attesting that it's a true record of the conversation we just had." Nodding to Sirius she added, "You'll need to sign as well, Lord Black."

Harry read quickly through the transcript, Sirius reading over his shoulder. Nodding, Harry stole Tonks' quill to sign his name in the space provided. After handing it to Sirius, Padfoot signed as well.

Handing the parchment to Tonks, Sirius told her, "You should come out with us on Friday, Dora. Me and Remus are gonna paint the town red."

Cocking an eyebrow, Tonks asked, "And Remus is...?"

Harry hid a smile behind his hand as Sirius replied, "Oh, an old friend of mine. He's a great guy. I'm sure the two of you will hit it off."

"If you don't mind, trainee," Dawlish interrupted snidely, "We need to get back to work. Social hour is over."

With real malice, Sirius turned his grey eyes on the older Auror. In that instant, all the years in Azkaban came to the forefront causing Dawlish to step back a pace. Turning away, he nearly ran to the fireplace. "Come on Tonks," he called over his shoulder.

"See you Friday?" Sirius asked.

"Sure, meet at the Cauldron? Seven-ish?"

"Yeah, we'll go from there." Patting her shoulder, he added, "It really is good to see you all grown up and doing well, Dora."

"Thanks Sirius." After another hug, she disappeared into the green fire.

Harry couldn't hold it in any longer. As soon as Tonks' feet disappeared in the fire, he broke out in laughter. Sirius, knowing what was tickling his godson's fancy, danced a little jig as he sang, "Oh, I'm a happy boy! Moony's getting his girl! Moony's gonna get laid!" over and over until Minerva Silenced them both.

"Good Lord. It's worse than the seventies."

.oOo.

"Hey, you got a minute?"

Hermione looked up from her book. An expression of confusion crossed her face as she set down, *A Compendium of Wards for Private Residences*. "Of course," she told Harry.

After he nervously twitched his head toward the portrait hole, Hermione stood to follow him. Eventually, they found themselves in the Room of Requirement. Hermione was becoming nervous herself, now. Harry hadn't spoken a word en route to the room. Now, he was sitting in the edge of the couch the room had provided, all the while holding his head in his hands.

Trying to be patient, she gently rubbed his back, waiting for him to tell her what was on his mind. Just as she was about to give in to her anxious curiosity, he whispered, "I talked with Minerva last week."

She merely nodded in reply. When he disappeared for seven hours, she figured he'd finally worked up the nerve to talk to someone. She knew that he'd confide in Minerva. The older witch was the closest person he'd ever had to a mother, despite Molly Weasley's protestations. Sirius was still a bit unstable, but had made surprising progress in such a short time. He'd come far farther than Hermione'd ever expected, actually. However, Minerva was his mother for all intents and purposes.

"She told me that I need to tell you some things. Some things I've never told you."

Hermione stilled. Many other wives or girlfriends would be in terror that their man was about to disclose an adulterous act. That was the farthest thing from her mind. Her imagination had taken her to 4 Privet Drive in Surrey and drawn up the most heinous crimes those monsters could have inflicted on her man.

Harry was silent for almost five minutes. Quietly, Hermione reassured him, "I love you, Harry. I always shall."

"I've cast the Killing curse. Twice."

Completely taken aback, Hermione gaped. That was not what she had expected. Shaking herself out of her stupor, she lamely replied, "Oh."

"Oh?" he challenged with a hint of anger.

Rolling her eyes at her husband, she tried to sooth him. She knew he must have been terrified to tell her this, but didn't he know it would never matter to her? He was everything.

"Yes, 'oh'. Give a girl a break, Potter. To say that I didn't expect that is a mild understatement."

Flushing a bit, Harry offered, "Sorry."

Rubbing his back again, she gave him a quick sideways hug. "I'm surprised, but I still love you more than I can ever tell you."

A deep sigh vented from deep in Harry's chest. Loosening the tension in his shoulders, he leaned into her.

"You were really worried about my reaction?"

Contemplatively, he began, "I've been so ashamed of those two instances for so long, I didn't know what to expect." Scrubbing his hands through his hair, he elaborated, "If there is any spell that I hate, it's the Killing curse. It took my parents away, it took you away and it thrust me into a life I never wanted. I hate it and yet, I used it to kill two people.

She gently brushed the tears off his cheeks. Tears he wasn't even aware of until her action. "Tell me," she encouraged.

So, he did.

When he finished, he was dry eyed. He had worked out the more overpowering emotions with Minerva. The residual tears from earlier were of apprehension regarding Hermione's reaction to his news. Apprehension that hadn't receded. Silently, he awaited his wife's verdict.

Without speaking, she stood and straddled his legs. Sitting on his lap, she stared directly in his eyes as she recited, "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all

things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends..."

His voice full of emotion, he remembered, "From our wedding."

She nodded. After a moment, she asked, "Do you understand?"

He nodded before embracing her tightly. "I'll always love you, Harry. From now to the close of time without end, I'll always love you."

His voice muffled, he replied, "I don't deserve you, but I need you. I love you."

Gently caressing his back with one hand, she pulled back slightly. Their eyes met before she kissed him – hard. She tried to convey all the passion, devotion, love and desire she'd ever felt for Harry James Potter. That her love was eternal.

Slowly, their kiss ended. Small nuzzles replaced the passionate embrace until they ended up entwined in each other's arms. "Thank you for not hating me," he whispered.

She was pursing her lips, which was always a prelude to the actual gnawing of her bottom lip. "I'm most annoyed that you kept it a secret. If I were in your shoes, I doubt I'd have done much different."

"Oh."

With a mischievous grin, she challenged, "Oh?"

Snorting at her gallows humour, he muttered, "Fong off." Gathering himself, he thought about her words. Slowly turning out of her embrace, he faced his wife. "I'm truly sorry about keeping it a secret. I was so ashamed..." Shaking off the wave of guilt, he asserted, "I've no other secrets of note, I promise."

Silently nodding, she took him back into her arms. All was not well, but getting there. Each day, they healed a bit more. Each day they got a few steps closer to their humanity.

.oOo.

"So, how was your date?" Hermione asked Remus. Harry had a Quidditch meeting and Sirius was who knew where. Despite not

being on the faculty, Padfoot spent a surprising amount of time in the castle. Harry had told her that Sirius had dared Dumbledore to restrict his access to Harry and Remus. Apparently, Dumbledore backed down.

Flushing slightly, Moony replied, "It wasn't a date."

"Uh-huh. Sure it wasn't. So, how was your evening with a woman that I'm sure you've been bothering Sirius about for the last few weeks trying to find out all you can about her?"

Grimacing, Remus dodged, "He told you that, did he?"

Hermione nodded but didn't say anything. Finally, Remus caved. "We all had a wonderful time. She's a delightful woman who maintains a child's wonder at the world mixed with a world weariness to which I can relate and understand."

"World weariness?" Hermione asked.

"Imagine all your life, everyone outside of your family has been asking you to change into someone else. They want you to be someone you're not for their personal amusement, or in later years, their lust."

"Ah. World weariness indeed."

Remus nodded while a contemplative expression fell over his face and a faraway look took over his eyes.

Hermione stifled her smile. The man was smitten and didn't even know it yet. "Do you like her?"

Without looking, Remus nodded. "Are you going to go out again? Just the two of you?"

Remus nodded again, but now a sad expression began to steal over his face. Finally, Hermione couldn't stand it so she asked, "What's wrong?"

"I feel like I'm lying to her."

"You want to tell her about the time travel." It was a statement, not a question.

Sighing, he nodded a third time. "She already knows about the Lycanthropy. I always feel obligated to get that out there immediately when I meet someone." He snorted and smiled, "She called me 'Wolfie' the rest of the night."

After a second's consideration, he elaborated with a question. "How would you feel if Harry came back in time, courted you and you found out a later date that you'd been married in the future that was?"

Hermione reflected on the question, trying to be as honest as possible. "I'd be pretty upset that he kept that kind of a secret."

Nodding, Remus agreed, "I would too."

"I'll talk to Harry about releasing you from the Vow. We don't really need it anymore." Her expression flexed with worry, "You understand why we asked for it, don't you?"

Remus waved away her concerns, "I understood then and I understand now. I'm considering asking Tonks for a Vow, just at the beginning."

Hermione wrinkled her nose, "Sounds like a prenuptial agreement."

"Yeah, I guess it does."

"We never really knew her 'before'. Do you trust her?"

Remus sat back in his chair and considered. "Pushing my feelings and attraction aside, I have to admit that I don't know her well enough to trust her. Neither does Sirius, really."

"Would she be offended by us requesting a Vow?"

"I don't believe so. After we tell her, I'm sure that there wouldn't be any trouble whatsoever. Despite her buoyant cheerfulness, she has a pretty level head on her shoulders."

"You've been on one pseudo-date and we're already discussing revealing deep secrets. You must be pretty serious about her," Hermione smiled as she finished.

"My heart tells me that if I fell in love with her once, I can do so again. She's a great person whose perpetual optimism easily counters my oft found depression." A devilish smile crept across Remus' face, "Despite appearances, don't forget, I am Moony of the Marauders."

"That's something I'll never forget," Hermione replied as she rolled her eyes. "I'll talk to Harry," she reassured Remus. "Maybe the whole family should discuss it?"

"That's a good idea. I'd like to know what Minerva thinks."

"What about Sirius?"

In a deadpan tone, he told her, "I'm well aware of what Sirius thinks, thank you very much."

"I can imagine," she laughed.

"No. You can't and be grateful you can't." This only caused her to laugh harder.

.oOo.

In early November, Harry's magical core began to 'settle out'. He and Hermione had pretty much opted out of spellcasting in all classes but Charms. Even then, Minerva had a private word with Filius, so the diminutive Professor had refrained from using the Potters as test students during class.

"So, what's the verdict?" Harry jibed from the couch in Minerva's office.

"That you're a smart mouthed boy like your father before you," Minerva returned without missing a beat. When her furrowed brow cleared, she told him, "Well, your Murchison magical index is off the chart, but the secondary diagnostics show you as having a relatively stable core. Stable for a thirteen year old boy, that is."

Curious, Hermione asked, "His core is still growing?"

"It appears to be. Physically, he's still thirteen. The 'extra' magical capability that he brought back merely caused an immediate expansion of his reservoirs of magic at his command." With a sharp motion, Minerva indicated Harry and Hermione to switch places before she performed the same tests on Hermione.

"You have the same stability as Harry, but your core is growing at a slower rate. Witches reach magical puberty much earlier than wizards, so they also stop growing earlier."

"So, we're cleared for high powered casting?" Harry asked as a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"Yes," Minerva replied hesitantly. "Why?"

"Oh, Sirius told me that I was a ponce and that he could kick my arse any day of the week and twice on Sunday. I intend to prove him wrong."

"Boys," Hermione muttered to herself.

.oOo.

Sirius was still limping when they all assembled in Minerva's rooms two days later. Harry smirked when Sirius winced as he sat on the couch. "Bum a little sore, Pads?"

The two fingered salute was Sirius' only response to his godson.

Remus hustled in as Minerva poured for everyone. Harry accepted his tea gratefully; he was nearly exhausted. He'd been on a tear with his animagus tokening. Ever since coming clean with Hermione and telling all to Minerva, he'd tokened seven times during the last three weeks. Strangely, it was very emotionally tiring each time. Hermione hypothesized that it was because they were reaching out to the natural world around them, stretching themselves in ways they'd never done before. Any muscle that is unused, rebels at first exercise.

"We're here at Remus' request," Hermione began. Indicating Harry with a casual motion of her hand, she told the group, "Harry released Remus from his Unbreakable Vow to keep him from telling

anyone about our story. The reason is that Remus feels that he owes it to Tonks to be honest with her upfront about his knowledge of the future. About their past in the future that was."

In a soft voice, Remus added, "It wouldn't be fair otherwise."

"We'd like the whole family to discuss the matter, though," Hermione continued. "Harry and I have talked about this and we're Ok with it if you all are." Harry nodded to reinforce the point.

Sirius shrugged. At Harry's pointed look he elaborated, "Look, she's family. If worst comes to worst I'll invoke head of house on her. I'd rather not, but I will if it's necessary." Leaning forward, he added, "I don't think it'll be necessary, though. Andi and Ted raised Dora right. There's also enough Black blood in her so she has a certain disregard for the rules. She'll join up."

Hermione nodded, assuming Sirius' vote was 'yes'. Turning to the oldest member of the family, she asked, "Minerva?"

Surprisingly, Minerva's lips were in a straight line, thinning to paper's edge thickness. This only happened when she was upset or distressed. "Sirius is correct that Nymphadora is a good person. She definitely has a disregard for the rules."

She left her analysis at that point forcing Harry to ask, "But...?"

Taking a deep breath, she finished, "But I'm unsure if Miss Tonks is mature enough to join us."

When Sirius scoffed, Minerva wagged her finger as she corrected him, "You can be extremely silly on occasion Sirius. However, you know the time and the place for your jesting."

"Some of the time," Hermione teased.

The thinness of her lips lessened by a minute amount. "True. Some of the time indeed."

"Min, are you basing your opinion on current experience with Tonks or based on knowing her as a seventh year Hufflepuff?" Harry asked.

Nodding in acquiescence, Minerva conceded, "That's a very good point. I'm basing my opinion on her behaviour as a seventh year."

"Are you willing to take the chance?" Remus asked softly.

With real emotion, Minerva replied, "For you, I am."

Touched, Remus nodded. To all of them, he said, "Thank you."

"I'm going to Memory charm her into a vegetable if this goes wrong, though," Harry joked. The humour was well timed and the group snickered and laughed for a few minutes.

After a suitable moment passed, Sirius spoke up. "I'd like to talk about another topic. The adult Death Eaters; those in and out of Azkaban." Waving his hand, he added, "I'm not even going to bring up the whelps because I realize that it's a confusing issue at best. Let's talk about my cousins, for example: Bellatrix Lestrange and Narcissa Malfoy.

"We all agreed last time we met that those already marked have signed their death warrant."

Now it was down to brass tacks. Sirius was mostly healthy, had full control of his family's fortune, had been exonerated and recompensed for his years in prison and was ready to take some action. There was only one kind of action to be taken in this situation.

With a steady gaze he met Remus' eye. Surprisingly, Moony's gaze was hard as he nodded his approval of Padfoot's unspoken but plain to see plan.

Unblinking, Minerva nodded as well.

Hermione nodded, her gaze losing focus as she remembered Days of Futures Past.

Harry's face was completely devoid of emotion. He and Sirius had discussed it before their duel and come up with a simple yet workable plan for the imprisoned Death Eaters. Now that Harry and Hermione's magical cores had stabilized, they could execute it as soon as they achieved their animagus transformation.

"Do we wait to see if Dora comes into the fold?" Sirius asked.

Pursing his lips, Remus admitted, "We've a date tonight. I'll tell her the whole story and we'll know tomorrow."

Uncharacteristically thoughtful, Sirius asked, "Are you sure? She is an Auror."

Considering his best friend's question for a long minute, Remus replied, "Yes."

"Right then. Potters!" Sirius mockingly ordered the time travellers, "Get finished with this animagus business, we've work to do. Moony! Go get your woman. Minerva!" She glared at him in reply. "You do whatever you wish," he finished lamely. "I'm going to get sotted tonight!"

.oOo.

"Who's this Slughorn fellow? Does he know Potions?" Harry asked the Twins as they all meandered to the Great Hall. Hermione was to meet them there as she was finishing her Occlumency tutoring session with Luna.

Fred shrugged, but George piped up, "He taught Bill for most of his time here. Charlie said he had him for a few years before Snape got hired. Bit of a self-important poof, Bill says. Always sucking up to the rich and famous," he gave Harry an appraising look as he finished.

"Great, that's all I need," Harry grouched.

"Ah, ah, Harrikins. Mustn't be cynical, you're far too young to be cynical without sounding like you're whinging," Fred teased. The entire time, George watched Harry with a solemn expression.

Rounding the corner they saw the doorway to the Great Hall. A brief smile flickered across the faces of all three, but was quickly banished. Moving toward the Gryffindor table, they sat, leaving a space for Hermione. Harry surreptitiously drew his wand as he ladled soup from the tureen.

The Twins were fiddling with their potatoes as the hall filled. Harry's face brightened as Hermione and Luna entered, chatting about

some topic or another. Beaming at her friend, Hermione broke off to sit with Harry as Luna gave a cheery wave before joining the Ravensclaws.

"How'd it go?" Harry asked.

"Surprisingly well. She has an affinity for the topic and is making remarkable progress," Hermione was enthusiastic as she helped herself to the roast beef.

"How remarkably?" Harry asked in an undertone.

Wincing a little, Hermione replied, "Not that well, but she's probably a year off at the rate she's going."

"Really?" he asked. That kind of progress was impressive to say the least.

"Mm-hmm," Hermione replied as she chewed her green beans.

"So what are you teaching Little Luna?" Fred asked,.

"Occlumency."

"Really?" George asked, surprised. "You know Occlumency?"

Hermione was surprised in turn, "You know what Occlumency is?"

Rolling his eyes, Fred replied, "Duh. We're the Weasley Twins. We were researching all the ways we could get caught when we came across Legilimency and Occlumency in a book. Couldn't find anything more detailed than a general overview."

"When was this?" Harry asked.

"First year."

"Why am I surprised?" Hermione rhetorically asked herself.

"So?"

"So, what?"

"So, will you teach us?"

Hermione sighed before she shrugged. "Sure, but it'll have to be after the New Year. I'm swamped with a project plus teaching Luna. Things should slow down by then."

Noticing Harry's hand, Hermione frowned. "Why is your wand in your hand?" she hissed.

"Ssssshhhhh!" George urged.

"Oh, no. You idiots have corrupted him, haven't you?"

"It was originally for Snape, but with him gone, we've had to switch to our alternate target."

"Who is?"

"Ah," George smiled. "He just entered the hall." In a hushed mock announcer tone, "Ladies and Gentlemen, Elvis is now in the building."

Slowly turning her head, Hermione saw none other than Draco Malfoy prancing to the Slytherin table.

She smiled. "I love you boys."

Out of her peripheral vision, she saw Harry flick his wrist in a complicated movement. There was a heartbeat pause before it began.

First, young Malfoy's robes began billowing in an impressive impersonation of the effect Snape always seemed to create as he stalked down the halls.

Then the robes turned yellow.

Then purple.

Then pink.

At this point, the blonde ponce was staring down at his robes in horror, the dreaded sentence forming on his lips, "My father..."

Suddenly, fiery letters shimmered into life over Malfoy's head. Slowly rotating so that everyone in the hall could have the chance to read them, they proclaimed "THE NEW GREASY GIT." There was an arrow pointing down to Malfoy in case the dimmer members of the student body missed the object of the declaration.

Everyone held their breath as they waited for the punch line.

The Hogwarts anti-Apparition wards are world renown. No one can Apparate in or out of the school grounds regardless of magical skill or power level. There is a little known fact about the wards, though. While prohibiting Apparition through the wards, one is able to Apparate for short distances within the wards. Say from fifty feet away, which coincidentally was the distance to the hidden package that Harry had ordered and the Twins prepared just that very morning.

Ancient Runes can be a deadly dull subject, but in the hands of a true Runemaster like Remus Lupin, all sorts of interesting avenues for magic can be explored. For example, after the coincident carving of the Norse rune Thera and the Egyptian rune Iwa are charged, they can cause an object to be apparated to its companion runes, wherever they may be carved.

Also of note, Runes don't have to be a certain size. They can be carved on the requisite slate and then shrunk to the size of a grain of sand and then sprinkled into the hair of Draco Malfoy while one is wearing your father's invisibility cloak.

Remus was standing in said broom closet waiting for Harry's signal. When the Communication charm sounded "Now," in his ear, he muttered the simple charging spell. This spell in turn charged Thera and Iwa, causing the forced Apparition of the contents of a fifty five gallon drum of axel grease.

On to the head of Draco Malfoy.

Fortunately, the grease had been treated by the Weasley Twins so that it couldn't be cleaned by magical means.

There was a pause of stupefied silence before the entire hall exploded in laughter.

.oOo.

Fortunately, it was a Hogsmeade weekend. After Harry joyfully waved his Sirius signed permission slip at Filch, he and Hermione tromped down the road to the only all-magical village in Britain. 'Accidentally' bumping into Minerva near the Three Broomsticks, the threesome began chatting about the latest topic in Transfiguration as they headed down a side street, presumably to cut across the village to Binding and Stitches, purveyors of rare books.

Harry quickly scanned their surroundings magically and visually. When all three nodded, there was a triple pop- pop- pop, as they Apparated away.

They appeared at the front gates of Rowan Hill. Minerva hadn't made the time before so that Harry could key her into the wards, so she was escorted on the grounds. It was a fair walk to the house, at least a half a mile. Hermione and Minerva were quiet, their minds preoccupied with the meeting to come. Harry was muttering while occasionally jabbing his wand at Minerva as he keyed her into the wards.

With a final flourish, he finished. "Apparition, floo and portkey," he told Minerva meaning that she was now allowed to travel to the estate via the named methods.

The wind was brisk as it blew off Cardigan Bay. Bundled in a heavy woollen coat, Hermione flipped the collar up against those pesky draughts which seem to burrow under one's jacket.

Eventually, they made their way to the front doors where Dobby was waiting for them. Harry had tried to hire the little fellow to be their discreet go-between, but when the hyperactive house elf found out about Harry and Hermione's home, he'd insisted on bonding with the couple.

After she sighed and rubbed her face in resignation, Hermione conceded.

Dobby had taken to Rowan Hill like a possessing demon. All the living areas on the main floor were now spotless and the master suite liveable again. As Dobby popped away with Harry and

Hermione's coats with Minerva's cloak draped across his arm, Harry doubted he'd ever seen the little fellow happier.

Heading to the main drawing room, they found Sirius, Remus and Tonks waiting for them. Padfoot and Moony were quiet and Tonks obviously nervous. She was fidgeting and crossing her legs back and forth. Knowing that Sirius was such a boisterous person, Tonks was well aware that something was up and it didn't bode well for her cousin to be so subdued,.

Dobby returned with tea and biscuits before popping out again.

After Hermione poured for them all, Harry began without preamble. Turning to Tonks he asked, "Remus told you everything?"

A bit pensive, she replied, "He told me that he had future knowledge and it included us being married with a boy." With a slight grin, she added, "I think he was just trying to get me out of my knickers."

They all smiled briefly, but the levity was forced and they quickly got back to business. "First, I want you to know that we all want you as part of our family. I'll need an Unbreakable Vow if you want to know the whole story, though," he indicated the others sitting quietly.

Soberly, Tonks contemplated the issue before asking, "Why me? What's so important that you need a Vow?"

Sirius answered, "It's important enough. Trust me Dora, it's important enough." Remus nodded absently in concurrence.

"Why you?" Hermione asked in reply. "For starters, because Remus asked us to let you into our family." Tonks turned to her boyfriend with a wide eyed expression. He smiled gently. Sirius rolled his eyes before making a 'get on with it' motion to Hermione.

Chuckling, Hermione continued, "Also, because...well, most of it is part of the story, but we trust you enough to tell you."

"But not enough without a Vow," Tonks finished matter of factly.

"It's part of..."

"Yeah, yeah, it's part of the story, I get it," Tonks waved away. Coming to a decision, she asked, "How exactly will this Vow be worded?"

They laid out the words which were identical to the Vow that Remus had taken. Nodding her agreement, she made her Vow with Harry, bound by Hermione.

"Originally, a little over a year and a half from now, Voldemort will be resurrected. Two and a half years from now, Sirius will be killed and the next day, so too will Dumbledore. A week later, Voldemort will take over the Ministry. Shortly thereafter, he will take control of all of the UK and the world will swirl down the crapper in ever tightening circles. Hogwarts will be torn down, extermination camps are constructed to reinvigorate the 'Final Solution', but with muggleborns and half bloods replacing the Jews,," Harry baldly stated.

Tonks' face first was confused, but the more she processed Harry's statements, the paler she became. Being a metamorph, it meant her face was literally white by the time the full impact of the future realized itself for her.

Without pausing, she ran from the room, the sounds of retching following her. A few minutes later, she returned, a little wobbly but with more colour in her face. "Sorry," she mumbled. "Bit much to take in all at once."

"We understand completely. Moony here cried like a little girl," Harry teased.

"Fuck you," Remus muttered. Tonks smiled at the interplay, which was Harry's intent.

"How? How do you know?" the Auror asked.

Harry turned to Hermione who began, "We have the memories of our twenty seven year old selves..."

By the time she and Harry finished their tale, the tea had been replaced by a fine single malt whiskey. "...and when I came to, I was in Care of Magical Creatures class of all things. Harry was across the way, standing next to a hippogriff. He was looking at me with an intensity only my husband could muster." Hermione took his hand

while smiling fondly. "We...reconnected," which drew humorous snorts from Padfoot, "And sought out Minerva," Hermione continued, ignoring the man-child in the corner.

Harry laid out the action they had taken to avert the future that was. Pettigrew's capture, Snape's imprisonment and the coup de grace, "Today, if I'm not mistaken, Ms Skeeter shall be revealing all about Barty Crouch and his wayward son."

Frowning, Harry turned to Sirius, "Did you give Amelia Bones the tip that the article was coming out? We don't need either Crouches doing a runner."

Sirius gave a hurt look to his godson, placing his hand dramatically on his chest. "Who me?" Throwing a pillow at Harry, he added, "Of course I did you twit. Sent it yestermorning."

Harry nodded while Hermione cuddled into Harry's side. They had been working day and night on their animagus tokening process. They felt comfortable with the Transfiguration side, and they both had thirteen tokens. Minerva had suggested fifteen as a solid number, so they had gone out the night previous as it was a new moon, hoping to find mooncalves or any other lunar sensitive being.

"So what's the plan?" Tonks asked.

With a half smile, Harry replied, "Free Sirius, kill Voldemort and tell the rest to bugger off. So far, we've one item ticked off our list," Moony, Padfoot, Hermione and even Minerva smiled slightly at his quip. It had become Harry's standard reply to any question regarding planning.

Rolling her eyes, Tonks stuck her tongue out at Harry before reiterating, "Really, what's the plan to deal with his Dark Lordishness and his fan boys?"

"Well, we intend on killing Voldemort," Sirius replied. "Actually, Pronglet over there gets that honour. We've a plan to deal with the slime that are in Azkaban. They're the really dangerous jackals."

Nodding, Tonks processed the thought before she asked, "But what about all the rest that aren't in prison? Malfoy, Macnair and their ilk?"

"I've a plan for lucky Lucy, but the rest...not my problem," Sirius replied offhandedly.

"Not your problem?" Tonks asked with a hint of indignation in her tone.

"Yes, Dora. Not my problem. It's the government's problem. It's the Department of Magical Law Enforcement's problem." Standing, his expression turned thunderous, "Are we the only persons on the planet who know that Malfoy and their 'brethren' are Death Eater scum? Are we the duly appointed constabulary who's job it is to round up these criminals? We're shutting down Crouch, Pettigrew and Snape because they were integral to Voldemort's rise. The rest aren't our problem."

"But..."

"The only thing that allows evil to flourish is for good men to do nothing, yeah?" Remus quoted. When his girlfriend nodded, he continued, "We are doing something. We are working toward the end so that Voldemort is destroyed forever. Without him, the future that was won't be realized. Think about it." Remus implored.

Turning in his seat so that he was facing her full on, he proposed, "All these people that escaped Azkaban have been out there for the last twelve years and done nothing other than be evil gits. Unpleasant and so forth. They haven't been seditious. Leeches, that's what they are. The truth is that they are so poisonous to any growth of society that it's why their behaviour is criminal. They are the reason our society is so backward. They are the reason that innovation dies of strangulation here in the UK. People like Lucius Malfoy have bribed and used their wealth or influence to make society more corrupt than ever, but in the end, they aren't about to take over the world. That's what Voldemort can do. Without him, they're a bunch of poncy arseholes."

Sirius stared at Remus for a long moment before he burst out in laughter. "My cousin, a poncy arsehole!"

Harry chuckled and Hermione smiled at the thought of Remus calling Bellatrix Lestrange a poncy arsehole and the madwoman's response.

"But all those people could die!" Tonks objected

"The crux of the problem is not Voldemort," Remus explained. "The crux of the problem is the inherent bigotry, the rampant corruption and the sheep like mentality of magical Britain. They need a revolutionary like Ghandi, King or Christ to lead them out of this problem."

Tonks turned to Harry, her conclusion clear. If The Boy-Who-Lived took a stand, he could be that leader.

"Magical Britain can go fuck itself as far as I'm concerned," Harry drawled.

Hermione didn't look up, merely curled a bit closer to her husband. Sirius was stone faced while Remus merely nodded his concurrence. None of them had any reason to love their country aside from jingoistic pride. All of them had lost much from the worst excesses of their motherland.

Sirius had lost a third of his life to the Dementors. After his brother in all but blood had been slaughtered due to a betrayal by another he'd trusted; he'd been betrayed again. By his country. The betrayal had been life altering and nearly life ending.

Remus lost any possibility of acceptance by everyday Britons when, as a six year old boy, he'd been bitten by Fenrir Greyback. He was the most decent man that most would ever know, yet housewives had stoned him on four occasions. He'd been beaten bloody three times. The last time he'd awoken covered in piss. It was a testament to his humanity that he wasn't feral.

Hermione was a muggleborn witch who, due to her lineage, would never hold any gainful employment at any established firm, much less the Ministry. She'd been shunned by many even before the walls came down on the world. Afterwards, she'd been forgotten by the rest. In the end, her life had ended in a shitty grocer's, a tin of beans in her hand. No one besides her husband and parents had cared. She was one of many.

Harry had lost his entire life twice over. The first time had been when he'd been placed in the agony of torment that was his relatives' home and forgotten by all who should have looked out for him. The

second time had been when his country disavowed his many sacrifices and heroics in order to turn their back on him. They allowed their eventual destroyer time to manifest the power necessary to seal their doom. Voldemort had annihilated the world as they knew it. Yet most everyday magical Britons didn't want to be inconvenienced. They didn't want to believe that their downfall was nigh. They wouldn't believe the one who'd bled, killed and suffered for them.

The others all knew Minerva's story, but they would respect her silence and allow her to tell it to the newest member of the family when she felt it was time. She caught Tonks' anguished gaze as she told her the Truth.

"You'll try to reveal what should remain hidden, you'll try to incite people to learn from the past and rebel, but they will refuse to believe you. They will not listen to you...You'll possess the truth, you already do; but it's the truth of a madman," Minerva's passion was palpable as she railed against society and its adherence to custom. As a whole, all societies' behaviour was reprehensible, only striving against the norm in times of great strife, because of great necessity. Society never changed because it ought to, it only changed when it hurt too badly.

Tonks hung her head, admitting defeat. Nodding she conceded with, "You're right."

"I wish I wasn't," Minerva whispered.

.oOo.

They were late getting back to school, but in the end, Minerva apparated back to Hogsmeade with the Potters. Remus had stayed behind at Rowan Hill as Tonks wanted to talk. Sirius stayed with them.

All three were emotionally exhausted, so they were quiet as they hiked up the road which led to the castle. Absently waving to Minerva, Harry took Hermione in his arm as they trudged up the stairs to Gryffindor tower.

Turning the corner, they found Fred and George lounging against the wall, apparently nonchalantly killing time.

"Hey, guys,' Harry greeted as he and Hermione moved past the redheaded twins.

"You two have a minute?" George asked.

"We're knackered, is it quick?"

The Twins exchanged one of their 'looks' before shrugging, "It can be. That depends on you two."

After that enigmatic reply, Hermione's curiosity was piqued. "Room of Requirement?" she asked.

"Nah, too far." Tapping his wand in a triangular fashion on the face of the statue of Glinda the Good Witch of the North, they all entered the hidden room behind her when she floated to the side.

Fortunately, there was a comfortable couch which Harry sank onto with a sigh. Hermione followed him, nuzzling into his side.

"So, what's so important," Harry asked as he rubbed his eyes with his free hand.

In the most serious tone Harry or Hermione had ever heard, George asked, "How'd you do it?"

Harry froze. Dropping his hand, he stared at George. When he didn't flinch, Harry switched his gaze to Fred. He too was watching the 'third year' couple with a solemn expression.

"How'd we do what?" Hermione asked, attempting to be offhand.

"Time travel."

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to all who reviewed the first four chapters. Story status can always be found on my Author's page on FanFiction (dot) net.

2. Recommendation for the chapter is Harry Potter and the Three Travellers by Schlamboozle. Despite my loathing of horcruxes as a

plot device (splitting your soul?), it's one of the best post-HBP fics I've read.

3. For those of you unaware, Hermione recited from 1 Corinthians, chapter 13, verses 1-8.

4. Minerva's little speech to Tonks is plucked from Elie Wiesel's *A Beggar in Jerusalem*. If you haven't read anything by this incredibly moving writer, make the time. It's worth it.

5. When Remus referenced "Ghandi, King or Christ" when speaking to Dora, I was having him refer to the social upheaval and change spurred by His teachings; divorcing that aspect of Him from His Divinity.

6. This was a very emotional chapter to write, hence the longer wait time. Hope it was worth it, it took a lot out of me.

From Chapter 5

"How'd we do what?" Hermione asked, attempting to be offhand.

"Time travel."

Chapter 6

"Fong."

"You know, you keep saying that, but I have no idea what it means," George casually commented.

"It keeps her," he pointed to The Smartest Witch of the Age at his side, "From pummelling me on a regular occasion for saying 'fuck' all the time." When she smacked him on the arm, Harry merely raised his eyebrows as if to say, "See?"

"That makes sense. So now that we've had the obligatory attempt to dodge the question, let's return to the point at hand, shall we?"

"Indeed brother. Valiant attempt, though Harry," Fred consoled.

"You do realize what you're asking is ridiculous, don't you?" Hermione asked.

"This is what we meant by the discussion's length being up to you," George sighed. "Look, you're completely different than you were on the train. Your mannerisms, your speech, everything. This 'fong' thing is a perfect example. You say it as if you've been using it for years."

You," Fred pointed to Harry, "Are not only done with your homework, you're what? Finished through the end of term?"

"But...after the Chamber..." Harry stumbled through 'The Explanation'.

"Oh, put a sock in it, Potter," George chimed.

"You," Fred pointed to Hermione, "Haven't slept in your bed for months."

"Not that we care at all, it's just part of the pattern," George explained.

"You're both doing silent spellcasting most of the time when you think people aren't paying attention."

"You both know Occlumency."

"You captured Scabbers, or Pettigrew I suppose."

"Quite nasty, that revelation."

"True."

"Back on topic, brother."

"Yes. You knew about The Map."

"And that we had it."

"And the Room of Requirement."

"You've dropped our brother like a hot potato. Not like he didn't deserve it."

"You hang out with Lupin and McGonagall all the time."

"You got Snape arrested."

Holding his hands up to interrupt the litany of evidence, Harry deflected, "That wasn't me. Sirius did that."

"Whatever. You did it and you know it."

"But..."

"Shut it, Harry. We're proving we're right. Now, where were we?"

"Snape."

"Yeah, you got him put away."

"You know way too much magic for ickle thirdsters. That rune apparition, while a work of art, was way beyond any but the professors."

"But that was Moony!"

"Shut it Harry, we're working here."

"Let's not forget about your little exchange with Malfoy in the library," George added as he turned to Hermione. "Memory charms? Bone Knitting charm? For a thirdster? And what's all this 'Ferret' business?"

"There's more, but that's what comes to mind."

If they hadn't been so tired Harry and Hermione would most likely have come up with a suitable dive for the Twins. Or maybe not. Fred and George were obviously very perceptive, so maybe no matter what they had come up with the Twins might not have been thrown off track.

It didn't matter, though. The previous four weeks culminating in the emotionally exhausting day just past left the Potters' defences down.

In a flash, Harry had drawn his wand and was beginning the movement for the Memory charm when Hermione caught his arm. Her eyes red with fatigue, she slowly shook her head. "Not on our friends."

Deflating a bit, Harry nodded his agreement before holstering his wand. Looking back to the Twins, he saw their wide eyes tinged with a hint of fear on their faces. Cringing, he muttered, "Sorry."

"Add 'almighty fucking fast with the Memory charm' to the list," George breathed.

Hermione closed her eyes, trying to think of a solution that didn't involve mind raping their friends. They'd actually become quite close to Fred and George in this new incarnation, so she had no desire to hurt the fifth year wizards.

"You start Occlumency training tomorrow," Harry sighed, making the decision for both of them. When the Twins made to celebrate, Harry

interrupted them. "But, you need to agree to a Memory charm of this conversation."

Hermione frowned. She understood what he was getting at, but didn't like how he was going about it. Interjecting into the discussion, she told the Twins, "Dumbledore uses Legilimancy on students without scruple. Snape was worse, but thank heavens we don't have to deal with him any longer." Turning to Harry, she laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, "I think I have a better solution."

Returning her attention to the Twins, she told them, "No pranks until I tell you that you can defend your minds."

While Fred's face fell, George had an evaluating expression on his face. "We're right then?"

"I don't want you to even dream about this conversation. If Dumbledore got wind of this discussion, there would be hell to pay. People would die."

This brought the Twins up short. "Really?" Fred asked. When a stone faced Harry nodded, they both breathed, "Bloody fuck." For once, they didn't consult each other, but both came to the same conclusion. "Alright."

Turning to Harry, Fred offered, "If it would be better, I'd agree to a Memory charm that you promise to reverse once we're good enough at Occlumency."

Shaking his head, he told them, "Nah, Hermione's right. Dumbledore doesn't have time to ransack everyone's mind for no good reason." His eyes narrowed, "Except maybe mine." Shaking off the foul thought, he continued, "Stay away from pranks for the rest of the year so he'll have no reason to notice you and we'll be fine."

"The rest of the year?" George asked.

Nodding Harry shrugged, "Give or take. Look lads, I'm knackered and so is she," he squeezed his wife who'd lain her head on Harry's shoulder.

"Right." Fred stood and after another complicated tapping of the backside of Glinda, she floated aside again.

Before they left, Hermione asked, "How did you know where I've been sleeping?"

Fred smirked, "Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies."

.oOo.

"I can't believe that Remus laughed!" Hermione exclaimed.

Harry chuckled under his breath. Taking her hand in his as they made their way to the Black Lake, he held his tongue. Despite being mentally twenty seven, every so often the fourteen year old girl slipped through. When they'd told Minerva and Remus about the Twins newfound knowledge, Minerva had made all the right noises of concern and began speculating about Fred and George's maturity levels, Occlumency potential and so on.

After a five minute discussion between the two witches, Remus couldn't hold back any longer before he let loose a loud guffaw.

Harry had been confused, but waited patiently for Remus to get control of himself. Finally, his giggles subsided so he could squeak, "They remind me so much of us. It's just like when Prongs and Padfoot confronted me about being a werewolf." Wiping his eyes, he muttered, "God, I loved those boys. Still do."

Remus' reminiscences didn't sooth the ire of either witch, but in the end the foursome concluded that Hermione's plan was sound. Without Snape to interact with the Twins on a regular basis, they seriously doubted they'd ever interact with Dumbledore lacking a prank related reason.

Tonight, however, was a milestone night.

Tonight, Harry and Hermione were to take their animagus potion and attempt to transform for the first time.

Minerva, Remus and Sirius were waiting for the couple on the far side of the lake. As the Potters left the castle, their nerves overtook them and they fell silent.

The gibbous moon shone brightly down, while the crisp autumn air pleasantly chilled them. Squeezing her hand more for his reassurance than hers, Harry gave Hermione a jaunty smile while he told her, "It'll be fine. If Wormtail can do this, so can we."

She nodded silently as the three older members of the family came into view. Remus was tending a small fire over which two small cauldrons were simmering. Sirius and Minerva were chatting a few feet from him. Sirius saw them first.

"You two ready?" he asked.

"Never readier," Harry shrugged in reply.

Rolling her eyes at her husband's mangling of the Queen's English, Hermione stuck her hand out. Harry reached inside his robes to withdraw his token bag. Handing it to Hermione, he moved to his godfather's side. As Hermione handed Harry's tokens to Remus for immersion in the potion, she withdrew her own bag from a pocket in her robes.

Remus began to slowly add each of Harry's tokens to the potion, while Hermione added her own to the other cauldron. When he finished, Remus flicked his wand, starting a magical timer for five minutes.

"Did they get the Crouches?" Harry asked the group. He and Hermione had missed breakfast the previous few days after the Twins 'revelation'. Harry had sat with both boys until midnight force feeding the basic principles of Occlumency down their throats. The brothers were very willing and surprisingly serious, but they had a long way to go.

Minerva nodded absently. "Yes," Sirius replied as he grinned at Remus. "Tonksie came by to tell us in person that they found Barty the elder holding Barty the younger under the Imperius curse of all things." He paused dramatically, "Unbelievable!" Padfoot mock exclaimed.

Grinning, Harry muttered, "Shocking."

Adopting the tone of a gossiping matron, Sirius added, "I'll tell you what's shocking. Remus and Little Nymphadora disappeared behind closed doors for an hour without a chaperone!"

Hermione giggled at the combination of Remus' expression and Sirius' tone. Harry smiled at Minerva's expression. She was wistful of times long past and persons long dead.

A light tinkling chime announced to all that the five minute timer had expired and therefore, the potions were ready. Harry was surprised that the time had passed so quickly, but then remembered that Sirius was much smarter than he acted. He'd put his godson and his goddaughter-in-law at ease with his usual silliness.

"Which of you shall be first?" Minerva asked.

"I'll go," Harry volunteered.

After a steadying breath, Harry stepped forward to take the vial Remus offered. Without pausing, he shotgunned the disgusting brew down his throat. Shivering with disgust, he muttered, "Yuck."

Sirius snorted and smiled as he, Minerva and Remus backed away from Harry. None knew what his form would be, so it was only prudence to give him a bit of space. "It's pretty revolting as I remember. Five day old cabbage with a hint of yak shit."

Hermione muttered, "How do you know what 'five day old cabbage with a hint of yak shit' tastes like? Wait," she immediately interrupted, her eyes never leaving Harry, "I don't want to know."

All the while the interchange ranged back and forth, Harry was feeling...odd. It started deep in the pit of his stomach. It wasn't painful, but neither was it comfortable. It was a watery feeling that was slowly radiating outwards towards his limbs and head. Within seconds, his entire torso was moving and reshaping. By the time Harry noticed what was happening to his chest, the feeling had engulfed his entire body. Falling to all fours, he shivered, instinctively resisting the feeling.

"Embrace the Change! Embrace it Harry!" Minerva commanded in her no-nonsense Professor's Voice.

With a deep breath, Harry surrendered the fight, letting the Change wash over him like a wave. Groaning as he felt himself transform under the control of the magic, he shut his eyes. He groaned again, but this time it sounded raspy in his ears. Like turning on a light in a dark room, he could suddenly hear everything. Snapping his head up, he looked about, finding he could see everything, as well.

The Change began to recede. Regaining normal feeling in his body, he paused. Looking up, he saw Minerva beaming in pride, Sirius grinning delightedly, Remus shaking his head in amazement and Hermione excitedly bouncing in place. "You did it!" she squealed.

Urges to run, hunt and kill overwhelmed him. Seeing Hermione directly in front of him, his new mind immediately classified her as his mate; someone to protect, defend and for whom he would kill without a moment's regret.

His raspy growl reminded him that he couldn't speak. Looking down at the ground, he saw his hands were now large black paws. Returning his gaze to Minerva, he saw she was already in action. A heartbeat later, a large mirror was across from him. Staring back from the reflective glass was *Panthera onca*, commonly called the Black Panther but in reality the Black Jaguar.

Bright green eyes looked back at him with a shock of white on the Panther's forehead where a lightning bolt shaped scar resided on Harry Potters' brow. Extremely pleased, he looked this way and then that, observing himself in the mirror.

"Stop admiring your reflection like a teenaged girl," Sirius rebuked. "Ow!" he exclaimed as Hermione smacked his shoulder. "Wench," he muttered. "Anyway, come on Pronglet, change back."

Intimately aware of the feeling of the Change, Harry willed the magic to life within himself. Just like before, the liquid feeling was born in his belly. Quickly, it spread. Before Harry drew three breaths, he was on his hands and knees, panting from the exertion.

"That," he announced, "Was brilliant."

Before he could stand, Hermione tackled him to the ground in her embrace. The five magicals laughed as she delightedly squeezed

Harry. He finally gave her a quick kiss before he told her, "Your turn."

"Right," she agreed as she stood. Smoothing her robes, she took her vial from Remus. Imitating Harry, she immediately drank it off. Pulling a face, she tried to blink away the taste. Harry watched her expression. He could tell when the Change started for her brow furrowed and her eyes began to dart back and forth as she were trying to identify that which she couldn't see.

Seconds later, she was on her hands and knees. Her groans turned raspy as Harry's had.

"I don't believe it," Sirius mused.

"What?" Harry asked, looking away from Hermione for a quick second.

Sirius merely pointed to Hermione's hands. Harry looked and saw large tan paws in lieu of Hermione's normally delicate, small hands.

As if her body was melting, Hermione's figure began to reform and recolor. Her black robes became a tawny brown while her bushy hair crept down back and around her neck. Ten seconds later, a lioness stood in front of them, growling softly.

Harry couldn't suppress a wide smile. Looking up, he saw a smiling Minerva conjure another mirror for Hermione.

Grrawr! Hermione the lioness exclaimed when she saw her reflection.

"Transform back now, Hermione," Minerva commanded.

Moments passed, but Hermione changed much faster than her original. She too, was panting on all fours, a broad grin on her face.

"Names! You two need names!" Sirius exclaimed.

Waving his godfather off, Harry moved to help his wife to her feet. "Later, Pads, we need some sleep."

"Among other things," Remus muttered as the group headed to the castle. The teens unabashedly wrapped an arm about the other as they excitedly discussed the activities for the next full moon with Padfoot and Moony.

.oOo.

"Ready?"

She nodded, straightening her robes. They were standing in the Three Broomsticks with the Twins while waiting to use the public Floo. Harry flicked a stray bit of fluff off Hermione's cloak before she shooed him toward the Fireplace.

"Ministry of Magic!" he called. First George, then Fred followed by Hermione and finally Harry twirled away in the green flames. Fred was helping Hermione to clean the soot off her fine blue robes while George waited for Harry to – as usual – tumble out of the fireplace.

Braced for the impact, George caught The Boy-Who-Lived before he cartwheeled across the atrium of the Ministry.

"Bloody bugging..."

"Harry!"

Sighing, he mumbled, "Yes dear."

George smiled as he flicked the bits of soot off Harry's shoulder and back. All settled, the foursome saw Professor McGonagall striding across the atrium to collect them.

"Professor," Hermione greeted.

"Miss Granger, Misters Weasley and Mister Potter, the hearing is in courtroom four and will commence in thirty minutes." Turning to a red robed Auror, she motioned, "This is Auror Shanahan, he'll be escorting you to the witness waiting rooms from which you'll be summoned."

"Can I wait with Mr Potter?" Hermione asked in a hopeful tone.

"Your relation, Miss?" Shanahan asked in a genial manner.

"I'm his..." she trailed off before she replied 'wife', and filled in "Girlfriend."

Shaking his head, Shanahan nixed the idea, "Sorry, Miss. Only the witness in the waiting room or their spouse and that's only if the spouse is not a witness."

"Come, Miss Granger, I have Mr Weasley saving the both of us seats in the gallery." Nodding to her remaining three Lions, she wished them, "Good luck. Tell the truth and you've nothing to fear."

The lads followed Shanahan while Minerva and Hermione split off at the lifts. "She doesn't change much," Shanahan muttered.

"Which house?" George asked.

"Gryffindor, '87"

"Go Lions," Fred added.

They turned down a nondescript hallway littered with plain wooden doors, each bearing a brass number. "Right, Mr Potter, you'll be in room one, Mr George Weasley, you're in three and Mr Fred Weasley, you're in two. I'll be up there," he gestured to a desk at the head of the hallway. "If you need to use the toilet, stick your head out. If you need a drink or small snack, call for 'Joey' and our house elf will attend you. Questions?"

When none were asked, the three teens opened the door to their respective rooms and entered. Each hoped that the wait wouldn't be too long.

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Hermione and Minerva settled into seats between Sirius on Hermione's left and Arthur Weasley on Minerva's right. Molly was on Arthur's right, fretting to beat the band.

The redheaded matron was very far from Hermione's attention at the moment. This was the first time she'd seen Arthur since he'd died almost ten years in the future. Amazing the wear and tear the war and the loss of his family inflicted on him. She reflected that the day

he'd died, Arthur was almost completely bald, his normally trim frame had been gaunt, his eyes jaundiced and he had a noticeable shake in his hands.

Sitting between Minerva and his wife, the present day Arthur was visibly concerned about his twin sons testifying in what had become a capital case, yet he was still in the bloom of life. Granted his hair was still thinning, but his skin was pink and healthy and his eyes bright.

He unexpectedly turned to her. "Hermione! Good to see you girl. How's things?"

"I'm well, Mr Weasley. Yourself and Mrs Weasley?"

"Grand," he replied. Waving his hand toward the dais upon which three judges were settling, he added, "Wish Harry, Fred and George didn't have to go through all this. But..." His unspoken It has to be done was well understood.

Hermione nodded grimly but didn't reply as the sergeant at arms called for quiet. To her surprise, Albus Dumbledore preceded Snape from the prisoner's entrance. For a fleeting moment, she thought that Dumbledore was being tried as an accessory to some of Snape's more recent crimes. Banishing the thought as ridiculous, she waited.

The Potion Master appeared to be in good shape. He was clean shaven and dressed in well fitted robes. Snape mounted the steps to the questioners chair and sat. After a brief spot of glowing, the chains wrapped themselves about Snape's arms and legs, binding him to the chair.

Dumbledore strode to the defendant's table, sitting next to the bewigged barrister. The centre judge of the triumvirate, Lord Dundas, frowned. "Chief Warlock, state your business with this court."

Rising, Dumbledore replied, "My Lords, I shall be assisting the Honourable Mr Harvey in his defence of Potion Master Snape."

The frowns on the judges' faces deepened, but they were bound. One didn't need a license to assist a barrister during a trial.

Turning to the Crown's representative, Mr Finch, the displeased Lord Dundas made a 'get going whippersnapper' motion.

Mr Finch was a very experienced barrister. Usually, he represented the defence, but he'd been specially recruited by Amelia Bones to prosecute this case. To anyone even remotely acquainted with the British Magical courts, Atticus Finch was known as a man of unimpeachable integrity. Even his most entrenched enemies respected the man and trusted his word.

Director Bones had divined that Dumbledore would make a play to help exonerate his friend and associate. Playing to his dramatic nature, she figured Dumbledore would do exactly as he had; attempt to initially sway the court with his presence, followed by various statements of his 'unswerving support' of Snape.

Hence, Atticus Finch.

If any barrister was able to overcome the larger than life persona of Albus Dumbledore it was Atticus Finch. Finch's repute, bearing and character were so overwhelming that a silent Atticus Finch drowned out a speaking Albus Dumbledore. Albus didn't know it, but it was already Check and Mate. Snape was going to have, at the least, an extended stay on the shores of sunny Azkaban, he just didn't know it yet.

Rising to his feet in a slow, unhurried motion, Mr Finch began, "My Lords, the Crown shall show that Severus Snape did wilfully cast all three Unforgivable curses over a span of six months beginning in December, 1980 and ending in May of 1981. Secondly, the Crown shall show that Mr Snape did wilfully attack one Harry Potter on or about the third of November of this year. Finally, the Crown shall also show that Mr Snape has wilfully caused or allowed by inaction to cause the harm of no less than fifty students during his tenure as the Potions Professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

Amelia had thrown the last set of charges in as a dig at Dumbledore. The man had allowed a sadist to teach potions for years, causing an overall degradation of potions proficiency in the UK that should have been criminal.

On top of it, when she'd seen Harry's memory of a potion induced burn on Susan's arm, she'd "gone mental".

Julius Harvey was a round headed man, balding with thick spectacles. He wasn't a bad man by any means. He was a jovial man who went about his responsibilities in as pleasant a manner as he could. Defending Severus Snape was one of the more unwelcome tasks he'd been given in quite a long time. His sister's son was Neville Longbottom.

Setting aside his client's bad behaviour toward his nephew was surprisingly easy for the barrister. He was a professional who would do his best for his client no matter how odious the man was. Albus Dumbledore's theatrics were most unwelcome, though. There were far too many celebrities involved in the case as it was and having the long bearded wizard next to him attempting to whisper in his ear little 'nuggets of wisdom' was not very high on Julius Harvey's wish list.

Nonetheless, he rose to address the judges. "My Lords, the defence shall show that Potion Master Snape is innocent of all charges. He has never cast an Unforgivable curse, he has never assaulted anyone, much less The Boy-Who-Lived, and despite his best efforts, some children are unfortunately injured in his classroom due to their own inexperience or inattentiveness. Never have any been injured due to his wilful actions or lack thereof."

It was a brief opening statement, but Julius Harvey was a realist. He was facing his good friend Atticus Finch across the way. Atticus had some ironclad evidence and The Boy-Who-Lived to put on the stand. The defence was sunk.

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Hermione sat nervously in the gallery. She was fairly certain that Snape would be found guilty and spend the rest of his natural life in the loving company of the Dementors of Azkaban. Her nervousness was due to the presence and behaviour of the Headmaster. She didn't put it past him to attempt Legilimancy on Harry while he was in the Witness Box. That would lead to all sorts of complications that they didn't need.

Sirius wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her in close, "Listen up little one. All will be well and we'll head back to Rowan Hill for a nice dinner, alright?"

Relaxing into Padfoot's embrace, she nodded to accept the comfort and reassurance that he was offering.

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This is fonging boring.

Harry tossed the two year old Quidditch Illustrated on the table next to the others he'd leafed through. One article dissecting the advantages and disadvantages of an active Seeker did hold his attention. For ten minutes.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, he saw that it was nearing lunchtime, so he'd been in the waiting room for nearly three hours. Realizing that the Twins were in the same situation, he began laughing. They must be bouncing off the walls.

Reconsidering what he knew of Fred and George, he pondered what they would really be doing. Shaking his head, he realized they'd most likely be researching or experimenting with new magics. With that thought in mind, he was half tempted to transform into his panther form to get more used to it.

Now that they had finished their tokening and other preparation which had led up to their transformation, Harry and Hermione were able to catch up on the sleep they'd missed. Where before they'd been getting two to three hours a night, now they were easily pulling down eight and even ten hours a night.

Harry smiled as he remembered waking a few days before. Hermione was still asleep, for once. Usually, she woke him when she was casting the Disillusionment charm on herself or rustling his invisibility cloak about herself in preparation for returning to her dorm. This morning, though, he'd woken first.

She was so peaceful. He stared at her face for a long time, studying her. He saw the woman she would become, that she had been, embedded in her features. The longer he watched her, the more he saw the woman she'd been. Wonderfully, he realized that they now

had very different memories. Where before, all their memories were bittersweet, tinged with murder, loss or death, now they had happier reminiscences to draw upon. Sirius was free and alive. Remus was becoming whole after so many years of hurt. Tonks was fully involved in their lives. Minerva was healing from all her own pains. He had his Hermione and they were together in love.

After casting some quick charms to relieve both their full bladders and bad breath, he kissed the young woman who was and would be again his wife. She smiled into his lips, "What's all this about, Potter?"

Moving on top of her and settling between her legs, he kissed her neck. "Oh, this and that," he eventually replied.

Groaning, she wrapped her legs around his waist, "I do so like 'this and that'." The rest of the morning was lost to their love.

He was roused from his reverie by the appearance of a house elf. Joey bowed, placed a platter containing a standard, if bland, lunch on the table next to Harry. Without a word, he popped out.

Shrugging, Harry dug into his meal, wondering if he'd ever get to testify and get the hell out of there.

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The evidence against Snape casting the Unforgivables was damning. There were three witnesses to testify under the influence of Veritaserum that they clearly saw Snape cast the Killing curse and the Cruciatus. Two witnesses testified to his casting the Imperius.

Dumbledore's face had fallen when the fourth witness left the Witness Box. Finch had a very direct and unavoidable plan. He was the reaper mowing down a field of corn. Relentlessly and emotionlessly he ploughed through the same set of questions with each witness.

"What did you see on the day in question?"

"Are you sure that you saw the defendant, Severus Snape cast the spell in question and why?"

"Are you sure that the defendant cast the Unforgivable curse in question?"

"Do you have any ulterior motive in testifying today?"

Those four questions put to each witness under the influence of Veritaserum ended Severus Snape's life as he knew it. Despite any acts of redemption he may have undertaken after the fact, there are consequences to actions. He'd killed four people and tortured three others. He'd caused one father to kill his entire family. No amount of spying, regret and remorse can obviate those facts.

The only point in question was whether he would get the Kiss or life in Azkaban.

The defence tried. Truly, Mr Harvey tried every trick he could to elicit any fact or statement from the witnesses that could throw a shadow of doubt on his client. He failed to find anything.

"Should we consider a plea bargain?" Dumbledore whispered in Harvey's ear.

Annoyed at the use of 'we', Harvey replied in the same whisper, "Atticus is a good man, but we've got nothing with which to bargain. He's already got life in Azkaban for Severus. If he gets similar statements from Potter and the Weasley's plus the affidavits from your students..." The implication was clear that if the trial kept going on the course it had, Snape would have an appointment with the Veil of Death this afternoon.

"Can we appeal to Finch's humanity?" Dumbledore asked.

Pulling a face, Harvey shrugged. "I doubt it. Atticus probably has direction from Amelia to crucify Severus."

Dumbledore frowned at the evaluation. "I thought Amelia better than that."

Harvey rolled his eyes before ignoring his erstwhile 'colleague'

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Dumbledore and Harvey were not the only persons in the courtroom who foresaw the inevitable end of the trial. Hermione sat in the gallery watching the defendant.

Snape's face had been a blank mask for most of the trial. On a few occasions he'd slowly closed his eyes for a long moment, usually when one of the dosed witnesses was recounting a crime committed by the Potion Master. It was as if he were trying to hide from his past in the only way he could.

When the fifth witness to his casting of the Unforgivables left the Box, a tinge of pink appeared on the doomed man's cheeks. It was the only emotion he'd shown the entire day. Most considered Severus Snape to be completely in control of his emotions. If that were so, he would have treated Harry as any other student. He'd never have executed his near pogrom of non-Slytherin students. He'd never have lost control of himself on numerous occasions. No, Severus Snape was not a master of control; rather he was a master Slytherin. He was cunning, ambitious and ruthless enough to do what it took to achieve his goals. If that meant impenetrable Occlumetic shields while in the presence of the Dark Lord, so be it. Overall emotional control was not within that description.

Hermione stood to stretch her legs as there was a short recess called. Since it was just for ten minutes, she opted not to leave the gallery. Turning to Minerva, she was shocked to see her mother-figure shaking with suppressed rage. A concerned expression on her face, she asked, "Professor, are you well?"

With a jerky nod, Minerva lied. As her dark eyes flashed behind her spectacles, Hermione divined the source of Minerva's upset. Leaning in to the older woman, Hermione asked, "Is it because Albus hired Severus when he'd done all this?" she waved with her hand to indicate the Witness Box.

A flick of her wand created a small privacy sphere. Quietly, Minerva hissed, "He told me I don't know how many times that he trusted Severus. After this!" Breathing deeply, Minerva regained control of herself. "I'll be having words with Albus when we return to the castle, have no doubt."

Hermione winced; glad that she wasn't in Albus Dumbledore's shoes. After Minerva had her pound of flesh, she was sure the Board of Governors would want to have a similar 'discussion' with him as well.

The sergeant at arms was calling the courtroom back to order as the judges returned to their seats. Harry and the Twins were up next.

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"Finally," Harry murmured as Auror Shanahan opened the door and beckoned to him.

"Need to use the toilet?" the beefy Irish Auror asked.

"No, just want to get this over with," Harry replied a bit nervously. He was trying to play the part of a nervous third year student and found he didn't have to try too hard.

A few minutes and winding hallways later, Harry was led into the courtroom. Shanahan indicated the Witness Box before leaving. Gone to collect Fred and George Harry surmised.

Standing in the Box, Harry took the magical oath to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. He was surprised that the clerk left 'so help me God' off the end of the oath but shrugged it off.

Mr Finch rose from his table before asking Harry, "Mr Potter, would you please describe to the court what occurred between yourself and the defendant after the Gryffindor vs. Slytherin Quidditch match on November third?"

Nodding, Harry began to fidget with his robes. "I'd just finished cleaning up after the match and was headed back to the castle to get a head start on my Transfiguraition homework." A little reminder that he was a schoolboy wouldn't hurt. "Outside the changing rooms, Professor Snape grabbed me by the shoulder and pushed me against the wall of the changing room."

"Which shoulder, Mr Potter?" Finch asked.

"Er," Harry made a left/right motion before he replied, "My left."

Nodding, Finch motioned for Harry to continue.

"Well, the Professor pushed me against the wall. He got in my face and said 'I know you did something Potter'. I'd no idea what he was talking about. To tell the truth, I was kind of scared and didn't say anything. When I didn't reply, he slid his hand from my shoulder to my neck and began to slowly choke me."

There were gasps from the gallery and the Dictation Quills in the press box were scribbling at high speed.

"Now I was really scared," Harry added playing up the moment for a bit. "Before I could do anything, Fred and George Weasley rescued me. They pulled the Professor off me and tossed him a few feet away. The Professor yelled at them, assigning a month of detentions and five hundred points. He also told them to come with him to the Headmaster's office."

"George Weasley said that he would be curious as to the Headmaster's opinion of one of his Professors attacking a student. This seemed to stop Professor Snape in his tracks. Without saying anything else, he spun on his heel and stormed off."

Nodding, Finch asked him, "Were you injured due to the attack, Mr Potter?"

"Er, I don't think so."

"Did you seek medical attention?"

"No, it was just a bit of choking. I was fine."

Frowning, Finch let it go before motioning to the defence table. "Your witness."

Harvey rose. "Mr Potter, isn't it true that you are a substandard Potions student?"

Harry frowned, "This year I have a solid E that is close to being an O."

"Yes, but in previous years?"

Harry frowned, trying to remember his second and first year Potions scores. "I'm not sure how my Potions scores are relevant to Professor Snape attacking me."

"Just answer the question Mr Potter," Harvey clipped.

"I'm not sure. I believe I had an A last year."

"True, you had an A for both your first and second years."

Harry waited silently for the punch line. He didn't have to wait long. "So wouldn't it be fair to say that you have been a source of irritation to Professor Snape for over two years?"

Now that he saw Harvey's plan, Harry had to forcibly restrain himself from laughing, "Professor Snape has hated me from the first day he met me because my father was a childhood nemesis of his. As such he has consistently belittled and degraded myself and my parents. He has graded my work at least one letter grade lower than my peers and has outright Vanished successfully brewed Potions and graded them as a zero. If I'm an irritation to him, it's because of my lineage, not my behaviour."

Up in the gallery, Hermione wondered if Harry wasn't going a bit too far. He sure didn't sound like a third year student. Risking a glance at Snape, she saw the pink highlights on his cheekbones again. That can't be good, she observed silently. Gently grasping Minerva's hand, she inclined her head toward the bound Potion Master. Minerva frowned at what she saw.

With an indulgent smile, Harvey opined, "It must be difficult to be an orphaned public figure, Mr Potter. Do you usually act out in all your classes to gain attention that you haven't received due to your celebrity status and lack of parents?"

Harry turned white with anger. In the gallery, Hermione stood to make her way to the floor of the courtroom. Unsure as to the specifics of her intent, Sirius was fairly certain that cursing Harvey into the next millennium was on the agenda. Gently, he pulled her back into her chair.

As the gasps from the gallery receded, Harvey smiled at Harry again, raising his eyebrows in an 'I'm waiting for your answer' manner.

"I am sure I have no idea as to what your referring, sir," Harry ground out.

Internally, Harvey deflated. He'd hoped to bait The Boy-Who-Lived into a teenage rant which would therefore discredit him as a material witness. It was distasteful, but Harvey was literally working to try and save his client's life at this point.

Attempting another tack which he knew was risky but could be the key to saving his client, he asked, "What was Professor Snape referring to when he told you that 'I know you did something Potter'?"

"As I said before, I've no idea to what he was referring."

"Really?" Harvey asked with a hint of sarcasm. "You know nothing about casting a Memory charm on my client?"

Turning to the judges, Harvey held up a sheaf of parchment and declared, "Your Lordships, my client has been evaluated by three separate mind healers and all have found evidence of Memory charms being cast upon him." Striding to the bench, he laid the documents in front of Lord Dundas.

"The Crown objects, my Lord. The witness is a third year student," Atticus Finch stated as he rose. "It is ludicrous to postulate that he cast Memory charms on his Professor. In addition, this line of questioning bears no relevance upon the fact that Potion Master Snape assaulted this person."

"Goes to motive, your Lordship," countered Harvey.

After the three judges mulled through the documents, Dundas turned to Harvey and told him, "If you can't connect these documents to this witness with one more question, Mr Harvey, I'll sustain the Crown's objection. Understood?"

Sirius, Hermione and Minerva were tense with fear. If Harvey asked the right question, there would be hell to pay. Harry's face was blank, but inside he was a riot of fear and anger. If he lied, he'd lose his magic. If he told the truth to the right question the secret would be out. Holding on to the memory of his reunion with Hermione as his

anchor, he kept his face impassive. Dumbledore was already watching Harry like a hawk.

Nodding to the judge, Harvey turned back to Harry, "Did you cast the Memory charm that caused my client's memory to be altered?"

Inside, Harry's guts unclenched and he almost smiled. "I did not cast the Memory charm that caused your client's memory to be altered." I cast about forty or so, not just one.

Harvey must have seen something, as he turned back to the judges and asked, "My Lord, I would ask that you command the witness to cast the Lighting charm to ensure his truthfulness."

Harry drew his wand at the judges' nod. Mentally crossing his fingers, hoping that his logic worked, he muttered, "Lumos." His wand lit up like a searchlight, causing all in the courtroom to shield their eyes.

"Nox," he muttered. The quills in the press box started to smoke, the reporters were dictating so quickly. In his mind's eye, Harry could already see the headlines: BOY-WHO-LIVED A MAGE, or some other such nonsense.

"Great," he muttered to himself as he looked about and saw that most of the occupants of the courtroom were staring at him with wide, wondering eyes. Except Dumbledore, who had an evaluative expression.

You're wondering if this is 'The Power the Dark Lord knows not' aren't you Albus? Mentally, Harry ignored the old man and turned back to Harvey just in time to see his crestfallen expression. "No further questions."

Turning about, Harry left the Witness Box, heading toward the door by which he entered the courtroom.

In the gallery, Hermione melted into Sirius' side. Relief was etched on her features as Padfoot gave her a quick sideways hug.

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Harry made his way to the gallery. After Hermione scooted over, they shared a seat to watch the rest of the proceedings. It was far too public a place to have a discussion about his testimony, but Hermione needed to feel him close so she wrapped herself in his arms. The flash of a camera only let them know that which would come out soon enough. Harry and Hermione were a couple with pictures to boot.

First Fred and then George testified. Both gave the same substantive story. They pulled Snape off their friend when Harry was in danger. Harvey tried the same tactic of questioning the Twins motives, but just as with Harry, the attempt fell flat.

There was a mid-afternoon recess for the judges to deliberate. It had been a quick trial, the Crown's evidence was overwhelming. Neither the defendant nor Dumbledore took the stand as Harvey realized they could do more harm than good.

Harvey caught Finch's sleeve as the courtroom cleared for the recess.

"Atticus, can we deal at all?"

"What would you ask for in return for a clean sweep of 'guilty' pleas?"

"Life with no parole."

Raising his eyebrows, Finch replied, "Are you sure? I think I'd rather have the Veil than years uncounted with the Dementors."

Harvey nodded. As Finch considered, he proposed, "Look, the judges will be in recess for a while, I think. Talk to Amelia and see what you two can do, eh?"

Atticus nodded before shaking Harvey's hand. Before the two could leave the courtroom, Amelia Bones approached the two barristers, "I saw the two of you talking. No deals, gentlemen. This Death Eater is getting his just desserts."

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The recess was far shorter than everyone expected. The sergeant at arms called the spectators back to the courtroom shortly after a quick supper. Sirius, Harry, Hermione, Minerva, Arthur, Molly and the Twins crushed into the packed gallery.

Down on the floor of the courtroom, Snape was standing in front of the Questioning chair, his arms manacled. Flanked by two Aurors that Harry didn't recognize, he awaited his fate.

The judges returned, taking their seats while rustling parchment forms in their hands. Finally, Lord Dundas announced, "In the case of the Crown v. Snape, for four counts of murder by the use of the Killing curse, the court finds the defendant guilty.

"In the matter of three counts of torture by use of the Cruciatus curse, the court finds the defendant guilty.

"In the matter of one count of control of a person by use of the Imperius curse, the court finds the defendant guilty.

"In the matter of one count of assault and battery of a minor, the court finds the defendant guilty.

"In the matter of fifty counts of wilful neglect of minors in his care, the court finds the defendant guilty of thirty two counts, and not guilty of eighteen counts."

Turning away from his parchment forms, Dundas addressed Snape, "Severus Snape, your punishment shall be death via the Veil of Death not later than 15 January, 1994. May God have mercy on your soul."

Banging his gavel, Lord Dundas announced, "This court stands adjourned. Bailiff, place the prisoner in Azkaban to await his fate."

It happened faster than anyone could react. Dumbledore was looking in his lap, contemplating the situation, Harry and Hermione were talking with Sirius about meeting Remus for a late dinner while Minerva and the Weasley's were discussing Ron's abysmal performance in Transfiguration.

One of Snape's guards moved off to clear a path, while the other reached for Snape's arms. With a quick movement, Snape had the

man's wand and had cast a Cutting curse which slit the Aurors throat.

No one even noticed that the guard was falling, his neck fountaining blood. Whirling to his left, the condemned man lifted his wand. Hoping to cause confusion, Snape snap cast a series of Reductor curses at the underside of the gallery. The gallery was suspended over the courtroom proper by a series of seven rune powered levitation charms. Three of these runes were destroyed by Snape's curses.

With a roar, the gallery shook first to the left and then to the right followed by a precarious lurch forward. Screams of panic by the over two hundred watchers incited panic. Those in the back by the four doors off the platform were nearly trampled as the mass of screaming humanity surged toward the doors. Three people in the front row of the gallery toppled over the side, falling fifty feet to their deaths below.

"NO!"

Turning, Harry and Hermione watched in mute horror as they saw Arthur Weasley pitch over the railing. "MOLLY! NO!" Minerva shouted and dove over the Twins toward the redheaded matron. Molly had leaned over too far in an attempt to catch her husband, only to follow him to her death.

Too late to save the fallen, all the Aurors in the room moved to cast various Levitation charms on the platform while Dumbledore was levitated to the gallery proper and began to hastily inscribe new rune sequences. After three minutes, the gallery was stable. The doors in the back slowly unclogged and the survivors streamed out into the hallway outside the courtroom.

In the hallway, the Family and the Weasley Twins ran into Amelia Bones who was cursing up one side and down the other of a shamefaced Rufus Scrimgeour.

Severus Snape had escaped in the confusion and panic.

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"This is bad," Sirius observed.

"No shit," Remus replied.

"Guys, you're not helping," Hermione rebuked them. "Let's focus."

"The Twins upstairs?" Remus asked.

Harry nodded. They'd led the stumbling boys through the Floo to Rowan Hill. Dobby had provided a sleeping draught which knocked them both out. They'd been ensconced in two of the over twenty spare bedrooms with Monitoring charms in place to warn Harry when they awoke.

"Min's in the know and is telling Percy, Ron and Ginny tonight," Harry informed the Lycanthrope.

"Christ, seven orphans because of goddam Snivellus. Prongsie should have let you eat him all those years ago," Sirius lamented.

Moony didn't even bother to reply.

"I have no idea how the others are going to react," Hermione told the rest, "But the Twins are going to be mad. No, scratch that, they'll be furious once they break out of their grief."

"What about Bill and Charlie?" Harry mused aloud.

"Don't know. Bill was a decent fellow, but I didn't know him well at all."

"I expect that Bill and Charlie will get custody of their younger brothers and sister," Harry pondered.

Hermione shrugged as they all sat in silence for a bit, remembering Arthur and Molly.

"Damn," Sirius swore. "Let's do something. This weepy silence is killing me." Turning to Hermione, he asked, "What do we know for sure?"

"As far as Snape and Voldemort are concerned?" When Sirius nodded, she thought for a moment before beginning her list.

"Fact: Snape is now firmly on the side of Voldemort. His only recourse on the side of the light is death. He has no choice but turn to the Dark Lord now.

Fact: Snape has been fully in Dumbledore's confidence for years. We must assume that he knows far more than even we know.

"Fact: Voldemort needs assistance to return to his body.

"Fact: Last time the bones of his father were a key ingredient.

Fact: Snape is a Potion Master who, I'm sure, is more than a little aware of some of the nastier rituals out there.

Sirius interrupted, "Fact: I'm going to Apparate to Little Hangleton and remove those bones."

Harry nodded, "Yeah, but let's leave some other bones behind. We don't want Voldemort to attempt a different ritual. We want to know where he'll be. We've completely fonged the timeline, so let's keep something under a semblance of control."

A crack announced Sirius' departure. Harry spent the time puttering about Rowan Hill's kitchen making a quick snack. He'd had to give Dobby an order to sort out his clothes and watch over Fred and George so as to be allowed to cook for the Family. Needing something mindless to occupy his mind and hands, Harry baked a coffee cake and brewed a piping hot pot of decaf.

After informing the Weasley siblings of their parents' fate, Minerva was dealing with the aftermath of Severus' escape. The Headmaster was revamping all the wards for the school to ensure that the discredited and condemned Potion Master couldn't gain entry to the school for nefarious purposes. As Deputy Head, she was the second person required to alter or augment the wards.

A half hour later, the sweet pastry was cooling as Harry, Remus and Hermione sipped their smooth Kona blend. Conversation that was light about life and their dreams, turned vaguely serious.

"Do you two know what you're going to do about your parents?" Remus asked, indicating to Hermione with a nod of his head.

Harry shrugged before looking to his wife. "What do you think, love?"

"If we tell them the truth, I think it might be bad. Mum could go high order and Dad might very well dig in his heels and refuse to acknowledge the truth."

"Are your parents really so closed minded? They agreed to leave the UK pretty readily 'before'." Harry asked.

"They can be. When my Hogwarts letter arrived it wasn't much of a shock. I'd been Summoning things, starting fires and changing the colour of various things for a while. They were more relieved than anything to finally know the why behind all the strangeness."

She turned to Harry, "I wrote home yesterday to tell them about 'us' and to ask if you could come visit over hols and we could visit you at here."

"If you think you're sleeping alone any night, you're sadly delusional," Harry informed her.

Hermione smiled brightly as Remus rolled his eyes. "Of course not," she jibed. "I'll be next to you in our bed, here."

"Right," Harry sighed as he sat back, sipping at his drink.

A crack announced Sirius' return. "Any problems?" Remus asked.

Pouring himself a cup, Sirius shook his head. "Vanished Tom Riddle's bones and replaced them with some bones from a pauper's grave. I thought about transfiguring something to look like bones, but I figured we should place the real thing in case he checks. That should bugger him."

Another crack announced a new arrival. In an unintentionally humorous moment, the foursome discreetly drew their wands, each not wanting to alarm the other. It was all for naught when Tonks slouched into the room.

"Wotcher, all," she greeted. Sinking down next to Remus on the loveseat, she burrowed into his side. "Wolfie, I'm tired."

Sirius was in a quandary. He didn't know whether to give Moony a hard time or punch his lights out. Opting for neither, he asked, "What's up, Dora?"

"Director Bones has gone 'round the twist. We've an Auror dead, five civilians dead – one of whom was a senior government official - and a condemned man on the run. She reactivated Mad Eye and has assigned him ten people to bring Snape in dead or alive. Fudge is a gibbering idiot while everyone is acting as if Snape were the anti-Christ. They called in so many of us that they just realized over three quarters of the Aurors were at work for over twelve hours. That sent Fudge into a screaming hissy fit about overtime and it went downhill from there."

She closed her eyes and laid her head on Remus' shoulder.

A soft smile danced across Hermione's lips as she watched the budding couple. "A little more love in the world never hurt anyone," she murmured.

"Too right," Harry agreed.

Sirius cleared his throat to get the rest of the Family's attention. "Since our youngest members have finally got their thumb out of their arses, we can move out. Dora, I'll need a few Ministry portkeys from you and a watch rotation schedule. Harry, Hermione, we'll probably go the night after next. With Snape out there possibly looking for Voldemort, after a dozen years in Albus' confidence, I think we should strike fast and hard."

A cold expression settled over the Potters' faces and they nodded in agreement as one. "We may not have the chance later," Hermione observed.

.oOo.

It was nearly one in the morning when the Grim crawled out of the North Sea. He had to deliberately prevent himself from shaking his coat dry in order to stay as quiet as he could. Behind him a lioness and a panther padded up the rocky slope dripping the cold seawater from their coats.

The overlarge dog turned back and received a human-like nod from each of the great cats. Without any further deliberation Sirius headed up the hill, weaving between boulders and fallen rocks trying to minimize his noise as he passed through the scree.

The lioness followed while the panther slowly brought up the rear, occasionally checking to see if the group was being followed. Without challenge, they approached the walls of the fortress. Over forty feet tall and seemingly carved of obsidian; the citadel of Azkaban had stood since time immemorial. None now living knew who built it or its original purpose. The British Ministry for Magic had co-opted the facility into housing the most depraved of their criminals.

Slowly, Sirius followed the outer wall to the only entrance into the fortress. All three predators stilled in order to reach out with their senses. Listening, smelling and watching, they saw nothing near. There was a far away rustling like leaves in the wind, but they were in the clear.

Padfoot paused at the doorway, obviously fighting an internal battle. The panther nosed his shoulder in a combined reassuring and urging motion. Nodding, the Grim took a deep breath before stalking through the door.

Taking an immediate right, the threesome sprinted up a stairway and down a hall. Padfoot pulled over to the side, allowing the lioness to lead to the doorway at the end of the hall. Being the largest of the three animagi, she leapt at the door, shattering it under her weight.

Behind her, Harry and Sirius now transformed back to their human selves, boiled into the room stunning the two guards who sat at their desks.

Two quick Memory charms were soundlessly performed. Reaching into his robes, Harry handed Sirius one of the small blocks of wood they'd received from Tonks the day before. Settling it in the hand of the unconscious man, Sirius soundlessly tapped the guard's wand on the wood, activating the portkey.

Looking up, Sirius saw that Harry had successfully portkeyed away his own guard. Fortunately, the Warden of Azkaban was a moron

who only staffed the entire prison with two human guards overnight. There were plenty of Dementors, though.

Sirius began to tremble a bit under the influence of the demons. Reaching into his robes, he pulled out a block of Honeydukes Best, biting off a large hunk of the milk chocolate. Passing it to Hermione, she took a bite as did Harry.

"East Wing," Harry commanded.

Nodding, Sirius transformed again, letting out a small sigh of relief as he did so. Padding out the door and down an adjacent hallway, he led the Potters on a five minute run to the head of the East Wing of the fortress. This was where the most inveterate criminals were kept. Bellatrix Lestrange and her husband were the celebrity inmates. Barty Crouch had been reunited with all three Lestranges not so long before.

The bulk of the Dementors were also found in the East Wing.

Stepping in front of Padfoot, Harry caught Hermione's eye. When she nodded, they lifted their wands in unison.

Both reached deep inside themselves, encouraging the fires of their magic. Pulling, pushing and willing it to the surface, they stoked all their power into an inferno for one spell. Harry's eyes snapped open and Sirius was startled to see that they glowed an iridescent blue from lid to lid. Hermione's eyes were the same, the raw magic was leaking out of their bodies.

A very simple wand movement later and they both screamed, "FIENDFYRE!"

Dragons, Chimeras, Basilisks, Cockatrices and Manticores. Living flame personified in the most powerfully destructive creatures ever to exist rampaged down the corridors, up the stairs, through the walls and through the ceilings. Within seconds everything in the East Wing of the fortress was fully involved in the inferno that Harry and Hermione had unleashed.

Conventional wisdom says that the Dementors cannot be killed; only held in abeyance via the Patronus charm. That is incorrect. Dragonfire and Fiendfyre both can immolate the demonic monsters.

It is also said that the fire wielded by a true Elemental can destroy the beings, but no one can attest to the truth of that statement.

By the time Sirius had pulled Harry and Hermione back to the West Wing and stuffed a Pepper Up Potion down their throats, three hundred and twenty one Dementors had been consumed in fires so hot they rivalled the fires of Hell from which they'd been spawned.

On this plane of existence, they were unprepared for The Fire.

It goes without saying that the prisoners were unprepared as well.

Subtlety was long lost so Sirius shouted to be heard over the roar of the fires, "Can you do it again, or should I cast?"

Harry waved his godfather off as he stood, "I've got it."

Hermione took a steadying breath as she stood. Stoking their magic as best they could they repeated themselves in the West Wing. This time, Hermione passed out from the exertion and Harry stumbled to his knees. Expecting this, Sirius Levitated Harry and tossed Hermione over his shoulder as he ran for the shoreline.

Behind him, the immortal Azkaban burned.

Wading into the water, Sirius pulled out a length of rope which had a dual use. Tying one end about Hermione's wrist, looping the middle about Harry's waist, he grabbed the remaining end. A quick Floatation charm on the teens allowed him to swim out past the remaining wards of the island before triggering the portkey.

They arrived on the boat as it floated at anchor where they'd left it. Remus hustled over to them, wand out and already casting Drying and Warming charms on the teens. Once they'd been dried, he turned to his oldest friend and repeated the spells. Wrapping a warm blanket about Sirius' shoulders he picked up the teens as one and took them below decks. A minute later he was on deck and the small fishing boat was headed back to the coast of Scotland.

"Aren't you gonna ask if it went Ok?" Sirius rasped.

Moony snorted, "Turn around, Pads."

Looking over his shoulder, Sirius saw the entire horizon aflame. A satisfied nod was the totality of his gloating. Not bad for twenty minutes work after a half hour swim.

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to all who reviewed the first five chapters. Story status can be found on my Author's page on FanFiction (dot) net.

2. Recommendation for the chapter is an oldie but a goody: Harry Potter and the Lost Demon by Angry Hermione

3. As I said a few chapters back, I'm stealing the animagus process and forms from MissAnnThropic's most excellent fic Vox Corporis. I'm not naming their animagus forms Sagehunter or Knight, though. If you have cool non-vulgar names, drop them in the review.

4. Atticus Finch is wholly and completely owned by Miss Harper Lee. I bow before her writing and Mr Gregory Peck's incredible portrayal of the character.

5. Sirius never told the Ministry how he escaped. It stands to reason that if the wards allowed Padfoot to leave, they'd probably allow him to return.

Chapter 7

"Damn. Dumbledore's been having a bad week, hasn't he?" The glee in Sirius' voice wasn't feigned. He squealed with delight as he rustled from the front page of the paper to page four. "Why is the story always continued on page four?" he wondered aloud. With loud sloppy bites, Sirius ate his way through an apple as he finished reading the latest rant about the Headmaster's poor judgement in hiring and supporting a convicted murderer and child abuser. Throwing his apple core at his sleeping godson, Sirius called, "Midnight! Wake up you slob!"

The now half awake Boy-Who-Lived rolled over before blearily asking, "Whozzat?"

The night before had been the first full moon since Harry and Hermione had made their successful transformation as animagi. The new Potions professor, Horace Slughorn, had made an acceptable Wolfsbane for Remus, but the Family was all looking forward to a good Full Moon Run. The weeks had been tense and all were looking forward to the inevitable rambunctious play while transformed. Well, all looked forward to it except Minerva. The middle aged Transfiguration professor had protested that she was too small as a tabby cat and too old to run, so Sirius reminded her, "Don't cats climb trees?"

Her glare had been vintage Professor McGonagall. "Sirius Black, if you think for one moment that I'm going to spend a late November night sitting in a tree just to please you, then Azkaban has rattled loose more than one bolt in your head!"

So it was that Harry, Hermione, Sirius and Remus had tromped out to the Whomping Willow, slipped through the passage to the Shack to await the moonrise.

Some quick Transfiguration, Cleaning charms and Warming charms left what was suggested to be a Parlour in a fairly comfortable condition. The waxy and drained Remus sank onto a sofa, closed his eyes and waited for his cursed change.

Harry and Hermione traded a look of concern before turning to the expert. Sirius waved away their anxiety. "He's always like this just before turning. Leave him be." Settling on a wingback chair, Sirius

eyed his godson and goddaughter-in-law with an amused eye. "It's a tradition amongst the Marauders for us to have nicknames based on our animagus forms. Now that you two have completed the change and we're coming up on our first full moon together. Moony and I've decided to tell you what we decided upon for your names."

"We don't get to name ourselves?" Hermione asked with a sardonic tone.

"Did you give yourself your birth name?"

"Not likely," she muttered in response.

"Right. You, sir," he pointed at Harry, "Are now to be known throughout Marauder-dom as Midnight."

Waving his arm in what was supposed to be a grand gesture but came off looking like he was falling over, Sirius turned to Hermione. "You, good lady, are to be known throughout Marauder-dom as Longtooth."

With a half smile obliquely showing on his face, Harry turned to Hermione. "I like it," she told him. Turning to Sirius she told Padfoot, "Missus Longtooth approves and agrees with her name."

"As does Mister Midnight."

"Excellent," Padfoot replied.

"Excellent," Moony groaned. "By the way, it's time for you all to transform. It's time."

.oOo.

Hermione curled up next to Harry in bed. She'd been up late with Minerva helping with the funeral arrangements for Arthur and Molly. Bill and Charlie had turned to their old Head of House for guidance and help in their time of need. Hermione had volunteered to help coordinate the events for Minerva.

In the Future that Was, they'd missed the immediate destruction of all their friends and family. As such, they missed the downfall of the civilities surrounding death. The touches that separated humans

from animals, wherein witches and wizards had the opportunity to indulge in the finer aspects of death like funerals.

By the time Harry and Hermione had rejoined the magical world, they were lucky to be able to claim their dead, much less celebrate the life that'd been lost with a funeral.

The destruction of Azkaban was less than a week behind them, Molly and Arthur's funeral was scheduled for the next day. Neither she nor her husband had raised the issue of discussing their acts. For all intents and purposes, they'd murdered over five hundred inmates when they'd torched the island prison. As she snuggled next to Harry she murmured, "Love?"

"Hunh," he grunted in reply.

"Wake up, I need to talk."

Rubbing his face, Harry asked, "What's the bother?"

"How are you about Azkaban?"

"You mean killing all those people who had no way of escaping or defending themselves?" His precise wording told her that he was thinking on the same wavelength. She nodded into his chest as a reply.

"Maybe I'm a cold hearted bastard, but I'm perfectly alright with it."

She sighed in a mixture of relief and sadness, "Me too."

"We'll see how we feel about it in a year or so," he concluded.

.oOo.

"How're you guys?"

Harry sat on the sofa next to Fred, Hermione sitting in her husband's lap. George, on the other side of Fred shrugged for the both of them. The funeral had been extraordinarily sad. All seven of Molly and Arthur's children had put on a brave face while trying their best to keep from sobbing their hearts out.

Ginny had clung to Fred as a lone tear had tracked down his face. Bill, stoic and tall had done his best to fill the role his father had left behind, but on occasion little Billy Weasley poked through and his anguish was plain to see. Ron looked bewildered, suffering from the fate that so many teens experience when the worst comes calling at their door. 'Yes, it can happen to me after all,' is a traumatic realization for all.

Percy had busied himself greeting the numerous Weasley relatives. Hiding in activity did nothing to lessen his grief, though. As the bier for his mother was lit, Percy was the first Weasley sibling to break down and openly weep. Charlie held his younger brother amidst his own tears.

George had been quiet the whole time. Wordlessly watching all, but saying nothing.

Cornelius Fudge and the upper echelons of the Ministry for Magic had attended the proceedings. At the request of the family, though, no speeches were delivered. For that small show of decency, all were grateful.

Harry and Hermione had attended alongside, Minerva, Sirius, Remus and Albus Dumbledore. The old Headmaster was obviously grief stricken and said nothing to the other attendees outside of murmured greetings.

Bill and Charlie had talked it over with their brothers and sister, collectively deciding it best for the youngest five to stay in school. It's said that maintaining one's routine helps a person deal with grief. That person must have never had a parent die when they were a child.

A profound quiet settled about the friends as they sat in their common room. The air was heavy with anticipation and moment. Recognizing the situation, Harry and Hermione sat in silence with their friends.

The normally rambunctious Twins had been pliant and accommodating to all and sundry over the previous week. They'd been the shoulders to cry on for their younger siblings as Ginny wailed and Ron bawled. They'd described the events in painful detail to Percy when he insisted on knowing all. They'd gone to the funeral

of their parents and accepted the condolences of the attendees. They'd helped Bill move home to the Burrow while Charlie put in his notice. They helped Charlie as best they could to find an apprenticeship to work on his Beastmaster qualifications while in Britain. They'd done their duty to their family.

Now, they needed something for themselves. The common room filled and emptied, still the four friends sat in silence. Students worked on essays and practiced spells, still Harry and Hermione sat with their friends. Around eleven o'clock, with the common room empty, George turned to Harry.

"We want to help."

Harry gave the Twins an appraising look. It was obvious that they had deduced the perpetrators of the destruction of Azkaban. They wanted in on any further activities that would be along the same lines. George said nothing to incriminate anyone, but intimated that they were fully aware of the stakes. The ante for this game was pain while the wager was death; theirs or someone else's.

"Come on," Harry told them. Hermione stood without comment, her silence indicating her consent.

Four quick Disillusionment charms later allowed the foursome to move at will through the halls. While they glided through the dark passageways, Harry reflected on the public's reaction to the destruction of Azkaban and the associated killing of all the inmates and their non-human guards.

The rescue of the human guards of Azkaban had provoked the reaction for which Sirius had hoped. It had swayed the common folk that the destroyers of the prison were working for 'the good guys'. The public generally considered their action to be a public service.

After the infamous Halloween defeat of Voldemort in 1981, most of the public just wanted the problems to go away. There had been so much death. So much pain for so long they wanted to move on with their lives. 'Lock up the scum, make the problem disappear and stop talking about it' had been the general atmosphere. With Snape's attack in the courtroom, it reminded the older generations of the first Blood War. It brought back, all too clearly, the memories of

Voldemort and his Death Eaters' rampages through the UK during the seventies.

No one wanted to go back to those days. When the list of the presumed deceased prisoners was published in the Prophet, the general attitude had been 'good riddance to bad rubbish'.

The DMLE was duty bound to investigate the destruction, but the two Aurors who were assigned to the job concluded there was insufficient evidence to press the issue. Their entire evidence collecting efforts had consisted of a day kicking at the still smoking rubble trying to find any kind of gruesome remains which they could sell in Knockturn Alley. The Fiendfyre was thorough, though. Nothing was left.

Approaching the door, Harry dispelled his charm, signalling to Fred and George to release their own spells. Hermione had already moved to the door to open it. The young men followed her into the sitting room where Remus and Sirius were pouring over drawings and property plats.

Sirius cocked an eyebrow in question to Harry when he saw the grim faced Twins. "They want in," he replied to the silent question.

Turning to Longtooth and Moony, he waited for their input. Hermione nodded her assent while Remus rubbed his chin in contemplation. Finally, he told Padfoot, "They deserve the opportunity."

With a blank expression, Sirius told the Twins, "You may get killed."

"Yeah, we know."

"You will most likely have to kill people."

While George silently nodded, Fred replied for both of them, "We know. We aren't real chuffed about it, but realize that it's a possibility."

Looking around the room, Padfoot gestured to the others before saying, "We've all killed. It isn't glamorous or 'cool'. It's brutal, revolting and you'll have nightmares about it the rest of your life." With a gruff laugh, he continued, "A person who can kill without any damage to themselves or guilt is, by definition, a sociopath. Insane."

The silent nods of agreement and identification from the rest was stronger support than the loudest shout.

"You need to really consider if you can live with yourself if you're required to kill. At the same time, beware that you can never really know what it feels like until you've actually cast the spell which ends a person's life."

"It's the most important decision you'll ever make," Hermione echoed.

"It's also the one you'll most regret," Remus continued.

"And the one you'll most second guess," Harry finished.

"But in the end, we've saved more than we've taken. We've protected those who were unable to save themselves," Sirius finished.

With a friendly expression, Sirius rose before clapping the Twins on their shoulders. "We want you to be on board, but you need to make as informed a decision as you can. There are no do overs here. Dead means dead, for you and them. Take the time to think it over. Come back in a week or so. Talk to these losers," he playfully poked at Harry and Hermione who, mature adults which they were, each stuck out their tongues at Padfoot.

"Talk to them and maybe they'll tell you a bit of their stories."

Before Harry could reply, George told the group, "We've been working on Occlumency about six hours a day since..." They all understood when 'since' was. It was the day their parents had fallen to their deaths.

Nodding, Harry stood. "Right, let's go do some more work."

.oOo.

Harry and Hermione were heading from Arithmancy to the Great Hall when it happened. Arithmancy had been mind bogglingly boring for Harry so he was still a bit punchy as they meandered down the halls. Hermione had been rattling on about the latest theorem they'd discussed which, no matter how well she knew the subject, she still

became excited. Harry was sure that if Hogwarts had a Maths club, Hermione would be president.

They were in a little used section of the castle, cutting through to make their journey shorter when they heard him.

"You fucking blood traitor, you should be begging to service me."

The whimpering reply precluded identification beyond a female teen in pain. The male was most definitely Draco Malfoy.

Harry's eyes snapped open. Together, the Potters dropped their satchels and sprinted down the hallway. Turning the corner, they saw that Malfoy the younger had pushed Ginny Weasley into an alcove. He was behind her and was in the process of forcing her to bend over.

In later years, Harry would honestly say – if he talked about it at all – that he had no recollection of his actions that afternoon. With a confusing mixture of pride and revulsion, Hermione remembered it all too well.

In a flash, Harry had drawn his wand. A jabbing motion later and the Fire Whip sprouted from the eleven inch holly and phoenix feather wand. Like a cowboy, the whip snapped and cracked as it flipped up and down. A flick of his wrist sent the rope of fire lashing out, wrapping itself about Malfoy's neck.

Hermione said nothing to stop her man as she ran for Ginny.

Harry pulled with all his might. He wasn't sure if he was trying to pull Malfoy off Ginny or to achieve another aim.

Either way, the meaty thumping of Malfoy's severed head as it bounced on the ground was the most unique sound they'd ever heard.

Hermione engulfed Ginny in her arms as the redheaded girl tried to cover herself. Her ripped blouse and torn skirt gave more evidence against the dead boy's depredations. Ginny's breaths came in rapid pants, a low scream keening out in an undertone.

"It's Ok, Ginny, he's gone now. He'll never hurt you, I'm here. He'll never hurt you..."

Harry stared at the wild eyed girl for a long moment. The bile rose in his gorge as he saw his wife console the distraught girl. Disgust fuelled his physical reaction until, unable to contain himself, he turned away to vomit on the floor. Wiping his mouth, Harry Vanished the sick and freshened his breath.

Unable to face the wreck that was Ginny Weasley, he turned his attention the corpse of the Malfoy heir.

A memory from fourth year inspired him, so Harry cast two quick spells. The cauterized pieces of Draco Malfoy were now two bones. A quick Translocation spell and the bones appeared in the deepest reaches of the Forbidden Forest where Harry was sure a predator would enjoy the snack.

Steeling himself, he turned around to see Hermione's face awash in tears as Ginny broke down. A Summoning charm brought their satchels to them. Pulling his invisibility cloak from his satchel, he gently wrapped it around Hermione and Ginny.

Hermione's eyes were hard and desperate at the same time. She'd seen horrors in war. She'd perpetrated horrors in war. This, though, was beyond the pale. A monstrous act by a boy they should have executed months before. She'd even decided to eliminate the foul boy, yet been swayed by others from what she knew to be right. Hermione had never hated herself more than she did now.

"Let's take her to Min," Harry whispered.

Slowly, the one seen and two unseen teens moved through the castle to the head of Gryffindor house's quarters.

.oOo.

Minerva dispatched Harry to retrieve Madame Pomfrey when told of what happened to Ginny. Ashen faced, she silently asked Harry about her assailant.

"I took care of it," he told her.

A jerky nod was her only reply.

After telling Poppy that she was needed in Minerva's quarters, Harry ran back to Gryffindor Tower. Bursting in the common room, he spied Oliver at a work table. "Where's the Twins?" Harry asked.

Without looking up, Oliver pointed to the stairs for the Boys' dormitory. Sprinting up the stairs, Harry turned into the fifth year dorm where he found Fred and George reading on their beds.

"Come with me. It's Ginny."

Books flew as the boys ran to follow Harry.

Harry paused as he went past the third year boys' dorm, but decided to leave Ron where he was for now. He'd let the Twins or Bill break the news to him and Percy. They ran to McGonagall's door where Harry stopped them from barging in the office.

"Ginny was attacked and almost raped." When the Twins' faces paled and tightened, Harry told them, "I took care of him. The pieces of his body are probably being eaten in the Forest right now."

"Malfoy?"

Harry nodded.

"Lads, Ginny is pretty torn up. She'll need her big brothers, right?"

George nodded, "Can you get Bill here? Billy has always been her favourite."

Giving the password to Minerva's door warden, Harry opened the door. Entering, they saw Hermione sitting on a chair. Ginny, Minerva and Poppy were missing from the room.

"They've got her in the other room," Hermione explained. "Doing an exam."

Hermione's red eyes belied the palpable rage which trembled her hands. She reached for Harry so he flowed into her arms. Fred plopped in a chair, his head in his hands while George stared out the window.

Harry gave her a squeeze and a kiss before moving to Minerva's fireplace. A pinch of Floo powder turned the fire green. After a cry of "The Burrow!" he forced his head in the fire.

Bill had a stack of parchment on the kitchen table which he was sorting through when Harry's head popped through the Floo. "Bill!" he called.

Surprised, Bill turned to the fireplace, his wand in hand. "You're needed at Hogwarts, step through."

Nodding dumbly, Bill stood and moved through the fire. When he saw the Twins, he scowled, "Are you two in trouble?"

"It's Ginny, Billy." George told him as he continued to stare out the window.

"What?"

Harry explained the situation, leaving out the execution of the perpetrator.

Bill sat in the chair next to Fred, adopting his brother's pose. "Dear God, what next?" he muttered. Sitting upright, Bill asked, "Have the Aurors been called?"

"Not needed, Bill," George told his brother. "It's been taken care of."

Understanding what was and wasn't said; Bill nodded and never brought it up again. The five of them sat in silence, waiting for the door to Minerva's bedchamber to open.

.oOo.

"So, does she want to be Obliviated?" Harry asked.

Bill shook his head. When Minerva had come out of her bedchambers, Bill and the Twins had rushed in to see their sister. Minerva's ashen complexion had told volumes about her own self recriminations.

Harry had warned her. He'd told the Transfiguration Mistress that Malfoy would hurt others when they'd discussed eliminating the worst of the worst future Death Eaters. Minerva had fought the notion that they execute children for their actions to come.

Now Ginny Weasley had been sexually assaulted and nearly raped.

Minerva's jaw had worked twice but the words hadn't come. Harry looked away while Hermione had merely nodded, indicating the guilty had been punished.

The Deputy Head had then left to inform her supervisor of the assault and that Draco Malfoy had absconded to parts unknown.

Madam Pomfrey had escorted a puffy faced, red eyed Ginny Weasley to one of the private rooms in the infirmary where she'd spend at least one night.

Bill and George had wandered out of Minerva's bedchambers while Fred had walked Ginny to the infirmary. The foursome walked toward Gryffindor Tower in a grim silence which was only broken by Harry's question.

"She said that the diary took enough of her memories, she didn't want to volunteer to lose any more." He pulled a face of disgust, "She did agree to revisit the issue if she was having problems coping."

"Is she going to see a mind healer?" Hermione asked.

Bill was silent for a short period of time which indicated only one thing. "Bill, don't worry about costs. I'll cover everything."

Sighing, Bill nodded. "I'm not my dad, so I'll accept your generosity. It would have been hard..." Harry waved away the new head of clan Weasley's expressions of gratitude.

"Least I could do," he mumbled.

They all paused outside the Fat Lady. George scuttled in the portrait hole to fetch his brothers as Bill waited. Harry and Hermione waved their exit to the tall redhead and moved off down the hall.

After turning the corner, Harry gently steered Hermione into a broom closet. She didn't even try to complain or pretend she didn't know what her better half was doing.

"Say it," he cajoled after casting a hasty Privacy charm.

"I KNEW and didn't do anything!" she screamed. "I had decided to kill the little fuck and didn't do anything! I let them talk me out of doing what I knew was right! And now...oh, poor Ginny," she trailed off into sobs. "That little FUCKER!" she ranted again. Turning away from Harry she kicked a bucket as hard as she could muster. Kicking it again and again, it bounced off the walls, bent and deformed.

After breaking a few mop handles she collapsed into Harry's arms. Her sobs of grief and shame were more cleansing now. Both knew, but would never say aloud, that they owed Ginny Weasley far more than could ever be repaid.

Sniffing, she straightened Harry's robes. "Come on," she told him after a quick kiss, "Dumbledore will want to talk to us soon."

.oOo.

In the hallway heading toward the Headmaster's tower, the Potters bumped into Remus.

"You heard?" Harry asked.

Remus nodded. His shame was palpable and similar to Minerva's. "Are you two alright?"

"We will be," Hermione lied.

Not bothering to challenge what all knew to be false, Remus asked, "Albus?"

Harry shrugged, "We figured he'd be calling for us, so we decided to just wait at the foot of his stairs."

"A wise decision, Mr Potter," the voice of the Headmaster called from behind the three friends.

Harry spun, drawing his wand as he did so. Hermione dove to the left, rolled and came up with her wand levelled at the old man. The aged Headmaster blinked at both teens, an expression of curious surprise on his face.

"Jeesuss, don't do that!" Harry hissed under his breath.

"I apologize," Dumbledore intoned slowly. "The two of you have had a...stressful day and I'm sure that has you on edge." Gesturing toward the gargoyle which guarded his office, he asked, "Shall we?"

Remus peeled off as unobtrusively as possible. It wasn't enough, though. As they ascended the stairs, Dumbledore called over his shoulder, "I didn't realize you were so close to Professor Lupin,"

Harry didn't say anything. They'd already been too indiscreet this day and didn't want to compound the injury by playing word games with the experienced debater. When neither Harry nor Hermione replied to his observation, Dumbledore merely pursed his lips and casually indicated for the youngsters to sit in chairs across from his desk.

Harry had noticed when they entered the ornate office that they were alone. No Aurors were present which meant they hadn't been called or were interviewing Ginny. Harry was willing to bet the Potter Trust's next quarter dividends that Dumbledore hadn't called the Aurors yet.

Hermione was obviously on the same thought train as her husband. "Sir, I thought we'd be discussing what happened with the Aurors."

A placating smile on his face, Dumbledore replied, "In good time, Miss Granger. Now, please tell me the full story. I'm sure that you may have accidentally left a few details out when you told Professor McGonagall what happened. You must have been quite shocked, after all."

Harry and Hermione frowned in unison at the implication in the old man's statement. He obviously didn't know anything beyond their fabricated story and was fishing to see if his statements could break loose information he didn't have.

Shaking it off, Harry told the Headmaster, "I don't believe we left anything out, sir. We were heading to the great hall after Arithmancy and were cutting through the old hall as it cuts quite a bit of time off the walk." Dumbledore nodded his understanding.

Hermione continued, "We heard Draco Malfoy say, 'You fucking blood traitor, you should be begging to service me'." She blushed a bit with the profanity and the directness of the statement. "We heard a girl sob or whimper so we knew something bad was afoot. Dropping our bags, we rushed around the corner to see Ginny collapsed in that little alcove there and Draco Malfoy running the other direction. I moved to Ginny, while Harry tried to catch Malfoy."

"Why did you try to catch Mr Malfoy, Harry?"

Looking at the old man as if he were insane, Harry replied, "Because it was obvious that he'd attacked Ginny, sir. Her shirt and skirt were torn and she was crying."

"I gather you failed to catch him then."

"Yessir, he scampered so that by the time I got to the entry hall he was gone."

There was a long evaluative silence from the Headmaster until he extended his hand, the long fingers reaching toward Harry. "May I see your wand, Harry?"

Slowly drawing it from his forearm holster, Harry asked, "To what end, sir?"

A forced smile preceded his answer, "Indulge an old man his curiosity, if you would."

Shrugging, Harry handed the holly and phoenix feather over. Dumbledore drew his own wand and muttered, "Priori Incantato."

A series of transfiguration spells preceded a Summoning charm. "Summoning charm? That's fourth year work. Who taught you that, Harry?"

Without blinking, Harry replied, "I've learned that I need to do a bit better in my studies, sir. With all that happened during first year and second, I would rather not rely on luck anymore."

A sincerely sad expression crossed Dumbledore's face, "I'm sorry you feel that way."

"A sixty foot Basilisk has a way of waking one up."

"True enough."

There was another long silence before Harry extended his hand. "My wand, sir?"

"Yes, quite. Well, that will be all."

"The Aurors sir?" Hermione persisted.

Another condescending smile. "In good time, Miss Granger. That will be all."

At the bottom of the stairs, Hermione huffed, "Unbelievable. He's no intention of calling the DMLE."

With a roguish grin, Harry asked, "Let's give Padfoot a Floo call, shall we?"

.oOo.

The Aurors arrived after dinner.

Harry and Hermione were interviewed by Tonks and Dawlish, once again. Sirius was silent this time as the subject matter was much more solemn. They told the same story to the Aurors that they told to Dumbledore.

This time, Dawlish didn't complain when Tonks told him that she was going to talk to her head of house for a bit and she'd see him back at Auror headquarters. Without a word, the Family walked the short distance to Remus' quarters. They found a still pale Minerva waiting for them.

"What really happened?" Tonks asked in a deadpan voice.

"We found him trying to rape a second year and I cut his fonging head off. After a quick transfiguration, I translocated his body to the middle of the Forest. I'm sure it's been devoured for a snack by now."

Tonks nodded approvingly. Sinking onto the sofa next to Remus, she snagged his hand before asking, "Who's next?"

"We have to be very careful. Malfoy was the only one stupid and brash enough to do what he did today. However, I wouldn't put it past Nott, Crabbe or Goyle to be almost as stupid, though. Dumbledore will be all over us like white on rice if his students start showing up 'missing' all of a sudden," Harry observed.

"He doesn't believe in coincidence," Minerva agreed.

"Sirius' escape, Harry's improvement in spellcasting, he and Hermione getting together, saving Ginny Weasley, the assault by Severus...I think he must be suspicious already," Remus offered.

"He checked my wand earlier," Harry offered.

"Luckily, you'd already cleared it," Hermione told him.

"Luck had nothing to do with it. I always do what you tell me," he teased back.

She knew he was trying to cheer her up a bit, so Hermione gave him as genuine a smile as she could.

"It'll be Ok," he reassured her.

"I want names, Midnight," Sirius ordered.

Leaning back in his chair, Harry stared at the ceiling. "Nott, Crabbe and Goyle for sure." Turning to Hermione, he asked, "Bulstrode and Boot?"

Sadly, she nodded her agreement.

"Flint, Stebbins, Carmichael, Entwistle and Bole."

They discussed names late into the night, all their faces becoming paler as the discussion drew out. Harry and Hermione found themselves retelling the peripheral aspects of the Future that Was in order to explain some of the situations

Realizing that there needed to be balance and common sense, Harry told the Family, "Look, I'm sure that some of these fucks wouldn't have done what they did had it not been for the situations they found themselves in 'before'. The worst of the worst, though, would have been like Draco and didn't need to go bad, they already were."

All present hung their heads for different reasons. Some for a misplaced sense of guilt, others castigating themselves for failing to act when they knew they ought.

Tonks was the one to address the point.

"Listen up," she snapped at the others. When the shocked expressions turned her way, she gave a chagrined grin before she added, "Look, I'm the new kid here, but even I know that no one here is responsible for what Lucius' spawn did to Ginny Weasley."

"You're no more responsible for Cousin Draco's assault than I'm responsible for Snape's attack in the courtroom. I knew he was capable of such an action, but am I responsible?"

"Yeah, but we were the only ones who knew he could do that kind of thing," Hermione whispered.

"Bollocks to that," Tonks countered.

They all regarded her with surprise. "From what I saw my seventh year and what I've heard since, every Professor, including old Grandpa Whiskers in his tower, knew that young Malfoy could and would pull a stunt like this. He learned at his daddy's knee and there's only one thing that Uncle Lucius teaches better than pureblood bigotry and it's violence."

Sighing, she leaned back into Remus' arms, "As for the other fucks, well...we need to deal with them post haste."

.oOo.

In the end, Sirius and Hermione set to work on devising a plan to eliminate the worst offenders that were current Hogwarts students. The hard part was to create a plan that still kept themselves out of the gaze of Dumbledore or the DMLE.

Harry was working overtime with Fred and George on their Occlumency. They had great motivation to excel at their studies and progressed rapidly. Neither was close to being able to consistently protect their minds, but Harry had a different idea.

"Lads, I need you to think about something for me."

George just cocked an eyebrow as a query.

"Think about diversions. I want someone looking left while ignoring any and all activity to the right."

"Are we talking distraction between two different sites or between two different areas at one site?"

"Both."

Slowly nodding as they thought, Fred asked, "Destruction?"

After contemplating for a few minutes, Harry finally told them, "Either. One case where it doesn't matter and the other where I want no destruction. Preferably remotely activated."

"Right, give us a week or so and we'll get you some options."

Impressed, Harry let it drop as he got back on track, "Right. You're both doing well with holding your focus, but the shield is flimsy. Remember, this is wandless and incantationless magic. Just like in transfiguration, your mental focus is key."

.oOo.

Her mother never came out and said it, but Nymphadora Tonks knew that Andromeda Tonks, née Black, hated her sisters. When Bellatrix was consumed in the inferno of Azkaban, Andromeda never mentioned her sister's death. Rarely did Andi Tonks ever talk about her sisters and the only time that Dora could remember an occasion

where her mum ever discussed her sisters, well, it is safe to say that Andi was stinking drunk.

Bellatrix had been her favourite playmate when they were children. Narcissa had been the baby and a good ten years younger than Andromeda, so the two weren't close. Bellatrix was only three years younger than Andi and had adored her older sister. Until Bella had turned twelve, that is. During her second year at Hogwarts, something happened to Bella and she had started down the path of insanity and sadism that led to her death while incarcerated.

Dora was well aware that her parents loathed Lucius Malfoy and Rudolphus Lestrange. They would shed no tears when they read the paper in the morning.

Cinching up the laces of her boots, Dora double checked her weapons. Primary and backup wands – check. Matching daggers on her belt – check. Various potions, healing and explosive in her belt satchel – check. Walking up to Remus, she inspected his gear for him. Tightening a few straps, she playfully patted his bum.

"Sirius, you ready?"

Padfoot nodded to his cousin before turning to the others. Harry and Hermione were ready and waiting. Remus nodded his readiness. Minerva was not accompanying the team to their destination. Rather, she was going with the Twins to set the diversion.

Harry stood. "Alright, Minerva, you ready?" When she nodded, he checked his watch. "Set the bombs to fire in twenty minutes unless otherwise directed. Godspeed."

Minerva paused before embracing each of the assault team, kissing Harry and Hermione on the cheek before she left to find Fred and George.

"Let's go."

Hermione held out the rope that they were using as a portkey. With a quick tap of her wand, the informal strike team was whisked away from Rowan Hill to a remote clearing in the woods in Wiltshire.

Immediately, the three animagi shifted their form and spread out in a fan shape. Midnight had point with Padfoot and Longtooth on the flanks. Moony and Tonks ran on the panther's heels as the group cut through the woods to their destination.

Within minutes, they found the spot where Remus and Sirius had been working on the wards for the past week. With Sirius cleared from any wrongdoing, he had full access to the Black vaults. Deep inside the back of the Black Family Vault, there had been a nondescript box inside which had been a series of dragon bone tiles. Carved on each tile was a repeating series of runes. When placed in a specific pattern, these tiles created a gap in wards which didn't cause the ward itself to fail. Having access to these little gems was one of the few times that Sirius was glad to be a Black. If the Ministry had been aware of the existence of these ward breaking tiles, they would have been confiscated in minutes.

It took a full week for Remus and Sirius to weaken the wards in the localized area so that they could insert the tiles. Last night, they'd finished their efforts and tested their work. Both Sirius and Remus had been able to safely traverse the ward line.

This evening, none of the Family paused in their run. In single file they sprinted through the hole in the wards.

Tonks' Auror conditioning and Remus' werewolf nature showed as they all ran at full tilt toward their destination. Breaking free of the trees, the manor house came into view. A few windows on the first floor were still lit. Bending to the left, the assault group headed to the back door. On the run, Remus and Tonks cast Obscuring charms over their faces. At the back door, Midnight, Longtooth and Padfoot all shifted back to their human forms.

Three quick Obscuring charms later and they were ready. Harry nodded to Remus who silently opened the door. The arrogant fools were too overconfident in their wards. The door wasn't locked.

Ghosting through the doorway with wands out, Hermione and Sirius took point. Heading toward the light spilling out of the doorway ahead, they heard the low sounds of classical music. Per the plan, Hermione sprinted toward the door, Sirius on her heels. Harry pounded after the lead two, Remus and Tonks covering their back.

By the time Harry entered the study, Lucius Malfoy was dead. He had a one inch hole drilled through his forehead. The channel drilled all the way through his head allowing bits of his brain to dribble out the back of his skull.

The Malfoy line was officially extinct, though the public wouldn't know it for years.

Without pause, the group reversed its line as Remus and Tonks took point, Harry following with Hermione and Sirius covering their rear.

Running now, the group pounded up the stairs. Remus and Tonks headed into the east wing while Harry and Hermione took the west. Sirius waited at the head of the stairway in case dear cousin Narcissa got by the attackers.

Thirty seconds later, the Potters heard Tonks shout, "Clear!"

Walking back, he found Remus and Tonks walking toward the stairwell. Without pausing, Tonks told the group, "She'd offed herself. Vial of poison on the nightstand. There was a shattered life force tracker next to it. Guess she figured out about Draco."

Ten minutes later, the group activated their return Portkey. Once again, they left their target burning behind them. The once ornate and beautiful Malfoy Manor was quickly consumed by Fiendfyre.

.oOo.

MALFOY MANOR DESTROYED took the headlines in the Prophet the next day. Just below the flickering picture of the remains of the burnt out Manor house was a secondary headline. VANDALISM AT MINISTRY.

Fred and George's prank bombs had been wildly successful. They'd managed to replicate the explosive qualities of the Mimubulus Mimbletonia and melded it with the odour of a stinkbomb and the viscosity of swamp mud. The end result had clogged all the fires in the Ministry Atrium and prevented all Floo travel and communication to and from the Ministry. It's a little known fact that the Atrium fireplaces are the master fires for the entire ministry. By shutting down the master fires, they shut down all the fires in the Ministry complex.

It had been a simple thing for Minerva to Apparate into the Atrium while wearing James Potter's invisibility cloak, set the twelve bombs and Apparate away. If Lucius had had the opportunity to call for help, he'd not have got any response.

Hermione noticed the furrowed brow of the Headmaster at breakfast the next day. Albus Dumbledore was worrying a bone. It was a most dangerous place for a bone to be.

.oOo.

End of term tests were ridiculously easy. Harry actually fell asleep during the history final. Hermione prodded him awake with thirty minutes to go. He dashed through the test, handing it in as the charmed bell sounded to end the lesson.

"You prat," she muttered as they headed back to Gryffindor tower.

He cheekily teased her back, "You love me."

A warm smile stole across her face. "Come on, admit it," he cajoled. "You love me."

Wrapping her arm in his, she leaned into his shoulder, "Ok. I do love you, you great prat."

"You packed?" she asked as they sat in the common room in front of the fire. When he nodded, she curled into his arms. "I'm not looking forward to being away from you," she admitted.

"Me either," he replied softly.

"It's not like we'll be apart very long. During the day, I'll Apparate home to Rowan Hill and return when my parents are due home from work."

"What if they call?"

"That's what a mobile is for."

"Will it work in at home?"

She nodded as she closed her eyes, "It should, the coverage extends over the area."

They sat there quietly as the room filled with other Gryffindors coming back from exams and whatnot. "Are you scared?" she asked.

He half shrugged which was answer enough. "I don't like being away from you after..."

The 'after' was plain to The Smartest Witch of the Age. After she was killed, he meant. Wrapping her arms more securely about him, she snuggled deeper into his arms, trying vainly to get closer.

Ten minutes later, George plopped down on the chair opposite the Potters while Fred headed up to the dorms. Hermione caught the tail end of his mutters that sounded something like "hate" and "fucking Herbology."

"George, language," she reproved mildly.

"Sorry, Hermione."

"What're your plans for the hols?"

The calmer of the two twins flinched at the question. Eventually, he replied, "We're going to be low key and all get together at the Burrow. Charlie has moved home with Bill, so we'll all be there...except mum and dad, that is."

Reaching out, Hermione took George's hand and squeezed. "May we visit?"

Nodding, he told her, "That would be nice. I think Ronniekins would act like a human being even."

"And if he doesn't, Bill'll hex our little bro' into the next millennium," Fred told the Potters as he sat next to Hermione.

They all fell silent as Ginny hurried through the common room to the stairs for the girls' dorm. George watched her go with a look of contained fury. Fred's eyes narrowed, "I wish you hadn't taken care of the mess, Harry."

Like most men would feel, Fred and George wanted to hurt their sister's attacker. No one commented, but all recognized the Twins' need to do something to help their sister. She was slowly making progress with the mind healer she saw three times a week, but her brothers could only be supportive and wait. Fred winced as he remembered what Ginny's roommate had told her the other day; Ginny 'only' woke up screaming two nights a week. Minerva had disabled the security feature on the stairs of the girls' dormitory, allowing Fred and George to go to Ginny during the night. For probably the first time in their life, they didn't exploit the capability in any way. It was the only way they could help her. She didn't want Percy or Ron. Since Bill couldn't be there, she wanted her twin big brothers. They had to wait for her to let them help in more concrete ways besides 'just' loving her and that was damn near driving them 'round the twist.

.oOo.

The next day the school packed up to head home for the Christmas holiday. Remus had already Apparated off to Rowan Hill; Sirius was to await Harry at the platform. Niceties must be observed as it would raise a few eyebrows for him to Apparate home by himself.

The train ride was quiet. Fred and George had holed up in a compartment with Ron and Ginny. Ginny had isolated herself to only her family. Between her odd behaviour her first year and the backlash of Malfoy's attack this year, Ginny Weasley had few friends at Hogwarts.

Harry and Hermione were sharing a compartment with Neville and Luna. Hermione and Luna had become much closer over the term. "She is totally bluffing about those imaginary animals," Hermione had told Harry one night in bed. "She was raving about some dock-tailed whatsit when mid-sentence; she stopped and gave me this little impish smile. Totally bluffing."

The conversation was light amongst the four friends. Neville was describing the Yule celebrations that the Dowager Lady Longbottom usually planned for the hols. "I hate the dance for New Years," he grumbled.

While Neville and Luna chatted about some of the people his grandmother associated with, Harry leaned into his wife's ear, "Would you care to accompany me to the dance, love?"

A surprised smile jumped on her face. Beaming, she turned to him, "Really?"

Her smile was infectious. Harry grinned back to her, "I screwed up 'before' when I had the chance to take you to a dance, so I'll jump on the chance early."

"I'd love to, but we're not invited."

Rolling his eyes, Harry turned back to Neville, "Mate, can Hermione and I come to the dance?"

"You want to come?" he asked, a hopeful expression on his face.

"It'll be neat to experience a purely magical celebration. We've never been to one before," Hermione replied.

"Yeah, that'd be great!" Neville excitedly told the duo.

Harry widened his eyes a bit and minutely nodded to the crestfallen Luna. Predictable, Neville had no clue to what Harry was hinting. After smacking himself in the forehead because of the thick headedness of the male gender, Harry mouthed, "Luna" to his friend.

"Oh." Visibly nervous, Neville turned to the petite blonde, gulped then asked, "Luna...would you, er, could you, no that's not it."

Hermione had her hand over her mouth in a vain attempt to stifle her rising giggles. Harry just smiled. Luna, on the other hand, had cast away her dejected expression and was now waiting for Neville to get it together.

"Bugger all," he muttered before sitting up straight. "Luna, would you please accompany me to the New Year's celebration at my home."

A faint smile on the corners of her mouth, Luna replied, "I'd like that very much Neville."

Exhaling loudly, he told her, "Good." Hermione's giggles escaped, bubbling over in a beautiful sound. Harry just chuckled as he slowly shook his head.

.oOo.

"Mum, dad, this is my Harry."

A small smile crept on his face as she introduced him as 'her' Harry. Extending his hand, Harry shook Steven Granger's hand. The male dentist Granger was a big man. Well over six feet tall with thick brown hair, he had a kind, open face. There was an aura about him, though, that hinted at danger. He was very fit, with large hands that looked like he could not only palm a basketball, but pop it with one squeeze. Harry never asked Hermione what her father did before becoming a dentist; it might be a profitable question.

Alice Granger was, in short, a beautiful woman. Her blonde hair was the only attribute distinguishing her from her daughter. If Harry hadn't seen first-hand the beauty that Hermione would grow to become, he'd have been convinced in that moment that Hermione was a supermodel in the making. If Sirius had been there, Harry was sure he'd have commented, "Damn, she's hot."

"It's so good to meet you, Harry. We've heard so much about you from Hermione's letters that we feel we know you already."

Ducking his head as he blushed, Harry replied, "It's good to meet the both of you." Despite being a grown man mentally and emotionally, Harry still craved loving parents. Minerva filled the role of 'mother' but she wasn't his mother and both knew it. It's reasonable to assume that he would always want loving parents, regardless of his age. Steven and Alice were his in-laws, so he was entitled to use the terms 'mum' and 'dad' with them and it scared the crap out of Harry.

His aunt and uncle were such horrific beasts that Harry had idealized the perfect mother and father as he grew up in the dank airless hole that had been the cupboard under the stairs. No one could live up to the standard he'd built in his mind, but he was casting in the wind with no return at Privet drive. Subconsciously, he made a decision when Steven and Alice had welcomed him so

warmly. He'd do what he had to do in order to have these people accept him. He wanted to be their son, or at least their son-in-law.

Hermione was nervous as well. Her parents were good people in every aspect of the description. At the same time, they were remarkably stubborn on some issues. Her fear since mid-term, when they'd first discussed how to deal with her parents, had been a complete rejection of her and Harry by her parents if they told the truth about their time travel.

At the same time, it was so good to see her parents again. She'd no idea how much she'd missed her mum and dad until this moment. She hadn't seen them in well over a decade, in her time stream that is. To see her mum so youthful and happy, her dad tall, strong and so dad almost brought her to tears of happiness.

"Harry, is your godfather picking you up?" Alice asked.

Looking about him distractedly, Harry told her, "He's around here somewhere. We'll hear him first."

At the quizzical expressions on the elder Grangers' faces, Hermione explained, "Sirius has a larger than life personality which usually shows up in volume."

"Amelia! How are you toots!" a voice boomed from the middle of a scrum on the platform.

Rolling his eyes, Harry jabbed his thumb in the general direction of the commotion, "That'd be Padfoot."

Steven asked, "Padfoot?"

Harry and Hermione traded mischievous grins, "I'll tell you later. Better, I'll show you," Hermione explained.

"You little hellion, Longtooth," Harry teased.

"Not anything on you, Midnight," she snarked back.

Now Steven and Alice were really confused, but held back their questions. The small group was spared a new topic as the mountain of personality known as Sirius Black made his appearance.

"HARRY!"

Sirius shouted to his godson as if he'd not seen him in over a decade instead of the night before. Flinging his arms wide, the Lord Black ran to his godson, wrapping him in a tearful embrace.

Hermione couldn't help it, she broke down in laughter.

"Padfoot! You menace!" Harry's muffled voice shouted.

"Oh, ickle Harrikins, I've dreamt about this!" Sirius sobbed in a dramatically histrionic shout.

"You moron, let go of me!"

Hermione was leaning on her knees, her breath squeaking out, she was laughing so hard.

"Oh, my beloved godson, say you love me and shall let me care for all your needs!" Sirius continued, pulling a fake hitch in his voice.

"I'm gonna sic Moony on you if you don't leave off!"

Dropping the act like a bad egg, Sirius stood back straightening his robes and replying, "Fine, be like that."

Noticing the Grangers for the first time, Sirius turned to them, stuck out his hand to Steven and introduced himself, "Sirius Black. I'm the runt's godfather."

"OI!"

Steven couldn't take it anymore and began to chuckle, "Steven Granger. This is my wife, Alice."

At his smoothest, Padfoot gently grasped Alice's hand, turned it and bowed low, "I'm delighted to meet you, Mrs Granger."

Harry poked his godfather in the side, "You'll have to pardon Sirius, Mr and Mrs Granger, he's a lunatic."

"Am not! That's Moony!"

Rolling his eyes, Harry turned back to the reeling dentists, "I'd like to invite your whole family to my home over break. You could come over for Christmas dinner and stay through New Year's."

The Grangers traded doubtful glances. "Well, that's very nice of you, Harry. Maybe you could come to our place..."

They stopped when Sirius chuckled. "You don't need to worry about the house. It's got, what," he turned to Harry, "Fifteen spare bedrooms?"

Harry shrugged, "Something like that."

Hermione leaned into her mum's ear as she whispered, "Mum, Harry's a billionaire and the house is a mansion. He's got a magical servant to cook and whatnot."

"Oh. Well, then, we'd love to come. We were planning to take that week off anyway. Where do you live?" Alice committed the family.

"We're on the coast of Cardigan Bay in Wales. Don't worry about transport, though, we'll provide a magical means of getting to the house."

Steven stepped into the conversation, "Well, if you can move about easily, why don't you come over tomorrow so we can all get to know each other better?"

Harry knew exactly what Steven wanted to talk about. Despite being a trained and hardened soldier, Harry gulped. No man wants to face the father of the woman they loved. Especially since he'd been shagging Hermione blind for the last three months.

"I'd like that very much, Mr Granger," he lied.

With a toothy grin, Steven smiled. "Excellent. Now, we must be off, traffic you know."

Hermione reached for Harry's hand to give it a squeeze. She saw the barely suppressed panic in his face and gave a warm smile. "Love you," she whispered.

Mastering his fear, Harry took a deep breath. He had to remind himself, that they'd only be separated for a few hours. He'd have her in his arms this evening and every night for the rest of his life. Returning her smile, he nodded, "Love you, too," he replied in a similar whisper.

With one last squeeze of his hand, she turned to follow her parents.

Harry watched her until he could no longer see her or her parents. She turned back to him twice and each time he waved to her. Each time she returned it. Finally, her mum wrapped her arm about Hermione's shoulder and leaned in, obviously starting a 'girl talk' type of conversation.

"It'll be alright, Midnight," Sirius told his godson in a comforting tone. He wasn't being facetious for once. He knew all too well the hell that Harry went through in losing Hermione for he'd been engaged to Dorcas Meadows when she was killed by Death Eaters. They were four weeks from their wedding when he buried her. Yes, Sirius knew all too well the agony of losing the woman you loved.

"Come on, mate. Let's head home."

.oOo.

They arrived in the entry hall of Rowan Hill with a double pop-pop. Dobby arrived a nanosecond later, making off with Harry and Sirius' cloaks as well as, Harry's shrunken trunk. The Boy-Who-Lived had no doubts that his belongings would be unpacked before Harry even left the entry hall.

Hearing holiday music emanating from the family drawing room, Harry headed that way. Inside, he found Moony and Tonks decorating. Dora was hanging garlands of real pine that were charmed with snow and sparkles. To Harry's delight, she was singing with the song in a very good voice.

"Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head..."

Leaning on the door jamb, he watched his family prepare for Christmas. Moony was positioning an unadorned tree in the corner while a large log fire crackled on the hearth. In the other corner,

unseen until now, a strikingly handsome blonde woman called, "Dora, where did you put those red bows?"

"That's cousin Andi," Sirius told him from behind Harry.

Turning back to his godfather with a quizzical expression, Sirius beckoned. Harry followed him to the main study where he sat in his chair. Sirius sat across from the large mahogany desk after pouring two tumblers with a finger of whisky each.

Handing Harry his, Sirius told his godson, "Look we're family. Despite all the shit out there, you and I both need the family around us whom we love and who loves us in return. James' mother was a Black – my aunt Dorea - so you and I are second cousins anyway. Andi and Ted are good people. They've not been let into the secret and I'd advise not letting them in on it. That doesn't mean we can't celebrate with them, though."

Sitting back in his chair, Harry sipped his drink. It was hard. He'd dreamt of a loving family all his life. Now that he was presented with the opportunity, he was afraid. Afraid that they'd turn on him like the Dursleys had. Afraid that they'd die and leave him like everyone else had.

Shaking away the phantom fears he'd been plagued with the entire day, Harry nodded. Downing his drink in one go, he cast a quick Breath Freshening charm on himself.

He'd had so much confusion about family this day that he had to laugh at himself. Fear, anticipation, longing and desire all warred inside himself as he was presented with opportunity after opportunity; first the Grangers and now the Tonks. Despite his fears, he decided to trust Sirius.

"Let's go meet the family."

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to all who reviewed the first six chapters. Story status can be found on my Author's page on FanFiction (dot) net.

2. Recommendation for the chapter is Growing Up Granger, but MattD. He's picked up the thread with year 2 and added some surprises. Very enjoyable.

3. Thanks to omegahurricane for his (?) recommendation for Harry's animagus name of Midnight. It works really well for me. Longtooth just came to me and seems to fit in as an obscure reference to Hermione's animagus form (just like Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs).

4. The decision to kill another human being isn't to be made lightly. Even in war, where killing the enemy is widely accepted as a necessary evil, soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines always suffer for their efforts. I wanted to explore that a bit with the Twins. As a military veteran who has served in war, I can attest that it's not an issue to be taken lightly. The enemy doesn't get up and go home when the scene is over. They get buried in the ground. Their wives, children and parents all grieve their deaths. While it may be necessary, it isn't to be discussed flippantly. It's far too serious for that.

5. Talk about bad luck, my desktop PC died. Fortunately, I'd learned from the laptop debacle and had been backing up every night to the external. Whew. Only lost a few paragraphs this time.

Chapter 8

"I can't believe my mum gave me The Talk!"

Harry was consumed in giggles as he lay limply on their bed. Hermione was lying next to him in the dark, indignant and embarrassed. Swatting him on the arm, she nearly shouted at him, "It's not funny!"

"Yes...yes it is," he panted between giggles.

After ten minutes, Harry finally calmed as did Hermione. "So, was it good to see them?" he asked as she nestled in his arms.

"Yeah, it was. I'd no idea how much I'd missed them." She began to giggle, "I showed them Longtooth."

Smiling in anticipation, Harry asked, "And?"

"Mum fainted."

"No!"

"Yeah, she did. Dad just stared for a minute before I turned back." She was full on laughing now. "I ran to mum and woke her. She said, 'I just had the strangest thought that you turned into a lion'."

She paused in her retelling as she laughed. Eventually, she squeaked, "I told her, 'Actually, mum, it was a lioness'."

Harry laughed loudly. "Did she find it amusing?"

"Not really. Dad laughed, though."

When they settled, she told him, "I told them about Midnight, Padfoot and Moony. They were really touched by the reason behind the Marauders' change. Said it was an example of real brotherhood and friendship."

"They were right," he commented.

"Yeah, they were." She traced patterns on his chest before she whispered, "I missed you today."

Closing his eyes, he pulled her tight, "Missed you too, my love."

They were almost asleep as Hermione lay on her side, Harry spooning behind her when she remembered, "Oh yeah, if I Apparate out all of a sudden it's because the ward I set on my door has gone off. I doubt mum and dad will check on me, but I really don't want to explain why I'm not in bed at their house."

"Good thing I remembered the charm to cancel the Trace," he mumbled.

"Mhmm," she groaned as she fell asleep.

.oOo.

Harry woke the next morning as he felt the bed shift among the rustle of sheets and their duvet. "You gotta go?" he mumbled.

"Yeah, it's six and they said they wanted to spend the day at home together. It's what we usually do when I get back for hols." She cast a quick Breath freshening charm on him before she did herself. After a lingering kiss, she asked, "You'll be by for lunch?"

Closing his eyes, he nodded. "Sirius and I'll be by around eleven or half past."

"Love you," she told him.

"Love you, too. See you soon."

An hour later the pressure in his bladder became too much, so Harry trudged to the magnificence that was the master bath at Rowan Hill. After passing the sauna, whirlpool and twenty five square foot wall-less shower, he entered one of the two WC's. A few minutes later a much more comfortable Harry emerged. The Tooth Cleaning charm was nearly flawless for keeping a wizard's teeth clean, but Harry still liked the fresh feeling that a good scrub with a toothbrush left in his mouth.

His facial hair was beginning to coarsen. Rubbing his chin, he cast a quick Shaving charm on himself. He had no fondness for a muggle razor. A luxurious shower led to a groan in front of his section of the

closet. Hermione had taken him clothes shopping in Hogsmeade for a small portion of the morning on one of their Hogsmeade weekends which expanded his wizarding wardrobe. Unfortunately, he still had the crap his aunt had forced on him amongst the leavings from his cetaceous cousin as his only muggle clothing.

Making a decision, he dove into the least disgusting of his clothes and headed downstairs for breakfast. Gathered around the table in the family dining room, he found Sirius reading the paper, Tonks and Remus chatting in undertones and a couple who he assumed were Andromeda and Ted Tonks. The night before, by the time he and Sirius had finished their conversation – and the bottle – the elder Tonks' had retired for the evening so this was Harry's introductory meeting with Dora's parents.

Andromeda looked up when Harry entered. Greeting the master of Rowan Hill, she introduced herself, "Harry, I'm your cousin Andromeda. This," she indicated the beefy, bearded man sitting next to her, "Is my husband Ted."

Harry nodded to them. "It's really good to meet you. Growing up and for the last two years at school I always thought that I had no other family. It wasn't until last night when Sirius reminded me that we're cousins on the Potter side that I had to rethink that idea." To himself he added, "I wonder if there's a family tree for the Potters around here?"

Shaking it off, he headed to the sideboard where he loaded up his plate. "What's the plan for everyone today?" he asked over his shoulder.

"I'm on holiday through the new year!" Tonks announced with more than a bit of glee.

"So you and Moony are going to be sequestered in your room, then?" Sirius remarked dryly from behind the Sports Section of the Prophet.

Ted choked on his tea while Andi shook her head at her favourite cousin. "Sirius, Dora is a big girl and if she wants to behave like a wanton woman, it's entirely her prerogative."

Ted choked again.

"Oi!" Tonks objected, while Remus remained suspiciously silent.

Narrowing his eyes playfully, Harry asked, "Remus have you been taking advantage of my innocent cousin?"

Remus didn't answer, merely held his hands in front of himself in a surrendering type of motion.

"Poor, poor Nymphadora, led astray by the nasty werewolf," Sirius blithely remarked as he turned the page of the paper.

A red faced Dora decided to deal with her cousin directly. She leapt from her chair and began chasing a suddenly fleeing Padfoot. His yelps were heard throughout the house followed by a shout of, "I surrender! Stop it dammit!" Five Stinging hexes to the testicles have a way of getting a man's attention.

Andromeda returned to her meal, smirking slightly. In an aside to Remus she told him, "Just don't break her heart and we'll be fine, Moony."

Smiling through his tea, Remus replied, "Of course, Andi."

Glancing about, Ted decided that he was finally able to finish his tea in peace.

.oOo.

"Come on Padfoot!" Harry was tapping his foot in the entryway as he waited for Sirius to come down from his room. Tonks had completed her 'instruction' of her cousin with a few choice Transfigurations which had taken the former Prisoner of Azkaban most of the morning to unravel. At eleven twenty he strolled into the entry hall without a care in the world.

"About time! Let's go, I'll guide you."

"What, you jonesing to see her that badly? Didn't she stay here last night?"

Growling, Harry reached for his wand. Chastened from his earlier experience with Tonks, Sirius mutely grabbed his godson's arm.

A twist and a pop later and the two had disappeared from the ancestral seat of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter.

The day before leaving school for the break, Hermione had dropped her Occlumency shields so as to remind Harry the precise location of her parents' home, so he had no trouble Apparating there. It was a very nice home on a large-ish lot of over ten acres in the countryside outside of Canterbury in Kent. The last time he'd visited was the evening of Dumbledore's death and she was sure that Harry had quite a few distractions that evening.

"We'll need to get this place warded to hell and back," Sirius murmured as he opened the gate which bore a sign inscribed with 'Redfields'.

Harry nodded, "You take care of it?" he asked as he preceded his godfather up the path. Sirius nodded as he began muttering to himself about the Goblins or maybe even contacting the Gnomes of Switzerland for the job.

A quick ring of the bell and the door was wrenched open by a smiling Hermione. Harry couldn't help himself as he returned the bright smile with one of his own. He'd seen her five hours before, but couldn't help but be excited at each reunion of theirs.

Sirius prodding him in the back brought Harry back to reality. Reaching for his wife's hand, he accepted the wordless invitation to enter. The Granger home was tastefully decorated for the holidays. Wafting from the back of the house was the most wonderful smell Harry'd ever experienced. Later, he realized it was fresh baked bread. Once again, Harry heard holiday music in the house, this time coming from the kitchen.

"...when a poor man came in sight, gathering winter fuel...hither page and stand by me, if thou knowst and tell me...yonder peasant who is he, where and what his dwelling..."

Hermione took the visitors' cloaks to hang in the hall closet. "Honey, was that Harry?" they heard Alice Granger call from what Harry supposed was the kitchen.

"Yes, mum. He and Sirius are here." Beckoning the two wizards to follow her, they all headed into the kitchen. They found Alice stirring a pot on the hob while Steven was chopping an onion.

Welcomes were exchanged by all. Steven washed his hands before offering refreshments to the guests. Harry accepted a mug of tea while Sirius curled his hand about a pint of bitter. Harry gave a quick glance of longing at the beer, but figured it wouldn't be too politic to ask for one himself.

To help break the ice, regarding Sirius' status, Hermione began, "Mum, remember how I was telling you about how Sirius was wrongly imprisoned?"

"Yes," the blonde woman replied. Half turning to Sirius, she asked, "What did happen Sirius?" Quickly realizing that it may be a touchy subject, Alice backtracked, "Only if it's not too personal."

Sirius waved away Alice's concerns. "It began the night Harry's parents were killed." Pausing, he thought before adding, "Actually, it started long before that. Do you know about Voldemort and the Blood War?" He glanced at Hermione to see if she'd told her parents.

Hermione nodded as Steven replied, "We know that some crackpot decided to use ancestry as a rallying cry to try and overturn your government."

Nodding, Sirius said, "That's a fair assessment. There was a lot of fighting by underground groups split into two different camps: those who fought for Voldemort and the darkness and those who stood up for the light. Unfortunately, not all the government agents could be counted for the light. Voldemort may be a crackpot, as you say, but he's a genius as well. The Aurors couldn't find him, much less catch him. He was...brutal in his methods."

"That's what led to all this 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named' and 'You-Know-Who' nonsense."

Sirius told the story of his friendship with James and eventually Lily. The use of the Fidelius charm to hide Harry and the eventual betrayal of the Potters by Peter.

By the end, Alice was sitting at the table, enraptured in the tale. Sirius could be extraordinarily silly on occasion, but he was an excellent storyteller. Dan leaned against the china hutch, completely focused on the Lord Black.

Hermione had drifted to Harry's side where he wrapped an arm around her while she laid her head on his shoulder.

"...first he killed James. We only know that because of where I found his body. Next he killed Lily. I found her in front of Harry's crib," he nodded to his godson who was looking determinedly out the window. "Midnight had a god awful cut on his forehead, but was quietly watching me as I went to pick him up."

There was a long pause as the ghosts of Azkaban surfaced in Sirius' eyes. Clearing his throat, Padfoot continued. "There was a pile of black robes and I noticed a wand, but didn't really register what I was seeing. I'd just found my brother, for all intents and purposes, and his wife dead. My little godson was obviously in shock. I was already consumed by guilt because I vouched for Peter. Because I vouched for him he was allowed to betray them. Now, they were dead and Harry was left an orphan."

A lone tear tracked down Sirius' face.

Sniffing, he finished, "I lost my mind for a bit. I barely remember Hagrid arriving and taking Harry away. I only remember running and running to find Peter. The next day I tracked him down near his mum's flat in Manchester. He blew up the street, killing an even dozen bystanders. Transforming into his rat shape, he scuttled off into the sewers."

By now, even Steven Granger was snarling whenever Pettigrew was mentioned. "I was a bit distraught," Sirius commented, giving a wry chuckle as he spoke. "The Aurors banged the magical suppressing cuffs on me, snapped my wand and portkeyed me to Azkaban where I spent the next twelve years of my life with the Dementors. Eventually, I broke out and found my boy here," he ruffled Harry's hair.

He then proceeded to relate the 'official' story of his appeal to Minerva and her capture of Peter. "So in the end, Harry had to live with Lily's sister and her husband. He had to live with two of the

most monstrous people I've ever met because I didn't do my duty by him." At the end, Sirius' voice was filled with self-loathing and recrimination. Gently breaking from Hermione's embrace, Harry moved to his godfather to embrace him.

Quite a few noses were blown at the end of Sirius' story and the box of tissues was passed around for all to use.

Alice moved to Sirius, embracing him firmly. "You poor man. Of course you were distraught that night. I'm sure Harry doesn't hold a grudge against you." Turning to Harry for support, she saw him shake his head in negation, agreeing with her.

Looking at the floor, Sirius told him, "Thanks, Midnight, but I can't forgive myself so easily after what you went through in Surrey."

Alice looked between Sirius and Harry for elaboration but found none. Glancing to Hermione, she saw her daughter shaking her head and mouthing, "Not now."

Desperately trying to leave the topic he hadn't wanted to be on in the first place, Sirius announced, "Well, Harry here needs some new clothes. Since I'm pants in this arena, I thought I'd turn the lad over to the Granger ladies for an expedition."

Steven smiled, beckoned to Sirius and left the room. Presumably to hide in the study. With a wave to Harry, Sirius followed Steven.

Alice looked from Harry to Sirius and back. A quick glance to Hermione confirmed her conclusion. Whispering, she told Harry, "Steven isn't going to hurt you, Harry. This is his first opportunity to attempt to scare a suitor of Hermione's. We don't have to go shopping if you don't need it."

Chuckling, Harry muttered, "Now I know where she got it from." Hermione and Alice both beamed at Harry's admission, but he continued, "I really do need some new clothes. All I've got is these worthless rags from my aunt. Now that I'm free of them, I'd like to get some nicer things."

Alice froze when Harry used the words 'rags' and 'free of them', but didn't pursue the issue. The little idea that had been developing in

her head appeared in her mind fully formed and she didn't like it one bit.

Turning to the cloak room, she grabbed her handbag and a coat. "Where shall we go?"

With a grin, Hermione spoke for the first time in a while, "Harrods, of course. If we have time, we'll pop over to Saville Row."

"And tomorrow, we'll go to Sloan Street," Harry finished.

Alice's eyes glittered; she and Steven could afford to go to the exclusive shopping areas of London every so often, but not casually. Glancing at the clock, her hopes dipped, "We won't make it in time, though."

Hermione grinned, "Don't worry, mum. It'll be just like magic." Pulling a brass key ring from her pocket, she held it out to her mother.

.oOo.

"I still say you were cheating, Harry. Part of a shopping expedition like this one is the carrying of a hundred pounds of shopping bags. Nipping into the loo and calling for your friend Dobby to take the bags is cheating."

Harry shook his head as he smiled. Alice had been good naturedly teasing him for a while about not wanting to carry his purchases. They ate lunch and dinner out and were just now arriving back at the house in Kent. Redfields was lit up on the inside with a curl of smoke from one of the four chimneys. Apparently Sirius and Steven were still bonding over something. As Alice opened the door, the shoppers heard Sirius shout, "Bollocks to that! He fucking tackled him! I thought you couldn't do that!"

Alice groaned. Apparently Steven had introduced Padfoot to the wonderful world of football. "We're home!" she called.

Steven poked his head out of the lounge, gave a short wave before returning to his match.

Hanging up her coat and placing her handbag on the counter, Alice told the teens, "Well, it's late and I'm done in. I think I'll head up and

read a bit." Turning to Harry, she gave him an unfeigned smile, "I had fun getting to know you today, Harry. I hope you come back." In a humorous undertone, she added, "Steven's bark is worse than his bite."

The threesome laughed. Hermione prodded Harry, "Show her Midnight."

In a blink, Harry had transformed into the black jaguar. Alice's eyes widened in surprise before the 'Aw' factor kicked in. Kneeling in front of him, she tentatively stretched out a hand to his flank, "You're so beautiful," she breathed.

"What's that?" Steven asked as he cut off the television. A moment later, he and Sirius joined the rest of the family in the kitchen to see Alice alternately stroking Midnight and Longtooth. Not wanting to be left out, Sirius transformed into Padfoot and promptly pounced on the big cats.

Alice backed away, giggling like a schoolgirl. Turning to Steven, she grinned, "Looks like your intimidation of the boyfriend isn't going to go as planned."

Wide eyed as he watched the menagerie romp in the kitchen, Steven replied, "Quite."

.oOo.

The next day, Sirius escorted the Granger females on their shopping expedition. "My purse is your purse," he intoned with over the top gravity. Alice was reticent, but upon Hermione's whisper, "He's as rich as Harry," all restraint gave way as the trio portkeyed to London.

Harry sighed as he saw his wife, mother in law and godfather portkey away. "Come on, lad," Steven called in a humorous tone. "Let's get this over with."

Heading to the study, Steven sat heavily in his chair, while Harry warily perched opposite him, a drum table separating the two. "Alright, ground rules," Steven began. "You," pointing at Harry, a wry grin tugging at his mouth, "No turning into a bloody great leopard and I won't shout."

Harry smiled, relieved that it might go well.

"Look, Harry," Steven began as he settled into his chair, "I know you and Hermione are great friends. I know you've literally saved her life. I'm fairly certain you think she's hung the moon." Harry nodded eagerly to reassure Steven this was true.

"This is the obligatory warning that if you hurt my little girl, I'll break your legs, got it?" Before Harry could respond, Steven continued, "Good. Now, I do want to bring up something that may be a bit uncomfortable."

When Harry frowned, Steven slowed his delivery. "Alice and I were talking last night. From what I gathered from Sirius, she from you and hints from Hermione, we can gather that your aunt and uncle most likely...didn't treat you very well."

Harry's face paled as he looked at the tops of his new trainers. The direct statement had been softened by the affection in Steven's tone and expression. As gentle warm hand on his shoulder caused The Boy-Who-Lived to look up again. "It's not your fault, lad. I want you to know that, even though you don't know me that well, you can always talk to me about anything." There was a small pause before Steven's face twisted, "Except sex. Never, ever talk to me about sex, got it?"

Harry chuckled. He didn't realize that Steven had such a quirky sense of humour. No wonder he and Sirius got on so well the day before.

Steven's face relaxed as he reiterated, "Seriously, I know that you and Hermione have the best possible foundation for a relationship and that's because you're best friends. Alice is my best friend, bar none. If you don't bollix things up, we could know each other for a very long time, boyo." The sincere grin on the dentist's face warmed Harry's insides like nothing outside of a Hermione smile.

"Thanks, sir. That means a lot to me. You're right; the Dursley's are rotten people." With premeditated deliberation, Harry added, "I've never considered their house my home."

"Well, I know you've got some massive house in Wales, but you can also call this house your home so long as you don't crush my little

girl's heart." The jovial expression, cancelled the sting of the words. Harry smiled, but realized that Steven was serious, as well as, joking. "We understand one another?"

Harry nodded warmly in reply, grateful that Steven had been adult about the whole thing. Maybe Hermione was wrong and they could tell her parents the secret. Maybe.

.oOo.

The Burrow looked as ramshackle as ever. The Potters and Sirius strolled up the lane, each lost in their own thoughts.

Sirius was remembering Arthur from the first war. An idealistic and brave young father, he'd devoted himself to fighting the darkness when his brothers in law had been killed. Padfoot was sure that a large part of Arthur's motivation came from watching his wife's grief.

Hermione was musing on the huge changes in the timeline. This time in their previous third year, the 'golden trio' was spending their second Christmas together at Hogwarts. Harry got his Firebolt from Sirius, about which she'd subsequently informed Minerva. That caused the biggest row between them in their entire relationship. She shook her head ruefully at her own failure to see the situation from Harry's point of view. It'd never occurred to her that Harry might've felt betrayed by her going behind his back to their head of house.

To be fair, though, she wasn't aware of the breadth of the abuse he'd experienced in the 'loving embrace' of his relatives. Had she known, she doubted she'd have run to their professor. Reconsidering, she remembered her slavish devotions to rules and authority figures. Shaking off the distraction, she realized it didn't matter anymore.

Harry was thinking of the first time he'd ever seen the house. Fred, Ron and George had rescued him from the Dursleys during his starvation period after first year. Well, one of many starvation periods, if truth be told. It was the first time anyone had rescued him from danger. In retrospect, he wondered if it was at this point that he began to accept that he may, someday, fit into a family of his own.

Squeezing the mittened hand in his grip, Harry reaffirmed his priorities. Everything came after her. Sirius, Remus, Minerva, Dora, Andi, Ted, the Twins...they were all wonderful people whom he loved, but they paled to insignificance next to the woman at his side. Without her, his life wasn't worth living. She was his mate, his family, his love. His life.

Shaking off the heavy thoughts, Harry mounted the front steps to the tumbledown house, giving the front door a few sharp raps.

The door opened to reveal Ginny Weasley wrapped in one of Bill's old sweaters. The enormous 'W' on the front of the emerald green jumper seemed oddly appropriate. There was a hint of fear in the back of Ginny's brown eyes before she recognized the visitors.

Beckoning the travellers in, she greeted them, "Happy Christmas, come on in out of the cold." Shutting the door firmly behind the visitor's she called out, "Bill!"

"What?" He bellowed from above stairs.

"Harry, Hermione and Sirius are here!"

"Right! I'll be down shortly."

As Harry helped Hermione out of her coat, he couldn't help but notice Ginny standing expectantly by the door. She was evidently working up her nerve for something.

"Thank you." Her eyes filled with tears as she angrily swiped at her face. Turning to Harry, she continued, "I never properly thanked you for your help in the Chamber or with...him," she spat the last with loathing. "I wanted you to know that if you ever need anything, you've but to ask and I'll do whatever I can to assist you." Facing Hermione, she added, "I owe you both my life and I can't let that pass by unremarked."

Hermione took the young woman into a firm embrace. No words were exchanged for words were useless at this point.

The rumble of four feet running down the stairs announced the arrival of Fred and George. Boisterous greetings from the Twins couldn't hide the strained expressions or the dark circles under each

Weasley's eyes. Ron gave the Potters and Sirius a polite nod in greeting before moving to the kitchen where he made himself a sandwich.

Charlie and Bill did their best to host their visitors, but the entire visit was strained. The pink elephant in the middle of the drawing room that all did their best to ignore was the missing Weasley parents. On more than one occasion, Harry caught himself before he asked what new appliance Arthur was tinkering with nowadays.

Percy shouldered manfully in a conversation with Sirius. He seemed sincere in asking Sirius about his duties and responsibilities as Lord Black, but in the end all conversation dwindled away to nothing. Taking the unspoken cue, Harry stood and extended his hand to Hermione. As he helped her to stand, he told the room, "Thanks very much for the tea and company, but we've a few other stops today."

Bill stood, weary and stooped. He was far too young to be so demoralised and yet what choice did he have? Someone had to take care of his family and he and Charlie had custody of their brothers and sister.

With a knowing look in his eye, Sirius shook Bill's hand before leaning in and whispering something to the newest head of clan Weasley. Bill gently shook his head before Sirius whispered something else.

"I'll consider it. Thank you Sirius."

"Your parents were friends of mine and if this little bit could help relieve your burden, I'd like to do it."

Clapping Padfoot on the shoulder, Bill nodded silently. Moments later the threesome were trudging down the muddy lane so as to clear the anti-Apparition wards. When the house was obscured by a stand of trees, Harry turned to his godfather.

Responding to the unspoken query, Sirius told his companions, "I offered to pay for the rest of Hogwarts for his younger siblings." Shrugging, Sirius added, "I've got more gold than Midas, ought to put it to good use."

"He'll never ask," Hermione observed. "Floo Minerva and set it up so they get an 'Anonymous Donation' that'll cover the rest of Hogwarts for the other five."

"He'll know," Sirius observed.

"So?" Harry countered. "What's he going to do? Say 'Take it back'?"

Pursing his lips, Sirius nodded. After a minute, he observed, "That sucked."

"Yeah, it did," Harry agreed. The Weasley family was in tatters. None of the walkers knew how long it would take for the family to recover. If it ever did.

.oOo.

The Family accomplished their first mission against the still free Death Eaters and the Death Eaters-to-Be that evening. Four more houses burned in the hellfire of Fiendfyre.

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"It's cold."

Hermione wrapped her arm around Harry's waist. When he absently wrapped his arm about her shoulder, she turned to look over the cliffs to the sea with him. He'd been out here most of the night, looking for what she didn't know. She had an idea, though.

"We're killing again."

"Yes," she replied. "Yes, we are."

Still staring out over the dark bay, he was silent for a long time. Eventually, he admitted, "God help me, but I don't give a shit about these people. After what Malfoy did, I have no qualms killing Crabbe, Goyle, Boot and Bulstrode or their families."

Another five minutes passed before he added, "At least right now I don't care."

She nodded in understanding. "I love you."

For the first time, his eyes left the horizon as he turned to her. "I love you. With all my heart. With all my soul, I love you."

She could barely make out his face in the light of the waning moon, but what she did see warmed her heart. His passion for her was written on her face. His love for her was sparking from his eyes like electricity. His devotion to her was as plain as the dark sky. Reaching up, she gently caressed his cheek. Leaning into her hand, he sighed.

"What about you?" he asked.

"I feel much the same. I really don't care about these people." Snuggling into his chest, she sighed, "Maybe that makes me a monster, but I really don't care. I care much more for the Weasleys, the Diggorys..."

"The Grangers," he interrupted.

Nodding against his chest, she asked, "What about the wards for my parents' place?"

"Sirius said the Gnomes would be there tonight. He Apparated over a bit ago to explain to your parents what's going on with these little guys running all over their property. Three days and Bob's your uncle."

"Good. I'll have to thank him."

They stood in the cold wind as it blew off Tremadoc Bay. The surf pounded below them, the wind whistled in their ears and still they stood there. Penance? Possibly.

Perhaps it was how they felt. Cold. In turmoil. Together in the middle of the dark as the wind blew and the surf raged. Together, they could weather any storm. Apart, they faltered and failed.

Silently, they turned back to their home. It was well after midnight and they needed their rest. Tomorrow was Christmas.

.oOo.

"I love you. Happy Christmas, baby."

The soft pressure of her lips on his woke him fully. Feeling the aftereffects of the Breath Freshening charm, he deepened the kiss, pulling her on top of him. When she groaned, his hands drifted down to cup her rear. Then, she smiled.

"You'll get your Christmas shag tonight, Mr Potter."

"Damn. Here I was thinking I was a good boy this year."

Her musical laugh faded as she Apparated to her parents' home.

Fully awake now, he groaned and shuffled to the bath. WC, toothbrush and shower. Wonderful how restorative the simple routine was for a person.

Washed, shaven and his hair (somewhat) combed, he dressed in some of the clothes he'd purchased with Hermione and her mum. At the time he'd thought it extravagant to buy a plain white t-shirt of Egyptian cotton, but after putting it on, he reconsidered the attitude. It was a pretty darn comfortable shirt. Dark green trousers and a deep red shirt finished his Christmas ensemble. No moron, he'd asked Hermione's opinion of his Christmas outfit before daring to dress. She'd given her approval as she said, "It looks good on you. Don't wear the combination any other day than Christmas, though, you'll look ridiculous."

Tugging at his cuffs, he sang under his breath as he made his way to the family dining room for breakfast, "That in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light...The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight..." O Little Town of Bethlehem had been sung in the church in Cornwall the day he came back in time. Sitting there in desperate prayer, the song had been burned into his synapses. Harry would remember the words to the song until his dying day.

As he meandered through the halls, Harry watched the portraits of his ancestors on the walls. Some were asleep; others feigning sleep but a few watched him as he made his way through the house. One or two he recognized from the Mirror of Erised his first year.

"...While mortals sleep the angels keep their watch of wondering awe."

Turning into the dining room, he had to duck. Tonks had chucked a rasher of bacon at Sirius who was laughing like a loon. There was a small splat as it landed beyond Harry.

"What are you laughing at, Wolfie!" Tonks turned on her boyfriend.

"Nothing, dear," Remus choked out between smothered chuckles.

"Mum!" Andromeda and Ted gave up and rolled with laughter at whatever had prompted Dora's outrage.

With a smile tugging at her lips, Dora stood and placed her hands on her hips. "It's not..." giggles bubbled up from her belly. "It's not...oh, bugger all. It's hilarious."

The Family broke into gales of laughter as Dora retook her seat, leaning into Remus.

Behind him, Minerva walked in from the entry hall Floo, greeting him, "Happy Christmas, Harry."

"And to you, too, Minerva," Harry smiled his greeting. "It's a Happy Christmas, indeed."

.oOo.

They decided to wait for the Grangers before opening presents. Andi and Ted were looking forward to meeting the young girl who Harry talked as if she were a permanent fixture in his life. Concerned, Andi had pulled Sirius aside and asked, "He seems a bit preoccupied with this Hermione girl."

Sirius snorted. "Preoccupied is a light way to describe it. Obsessed. Wrapped up in. Completely in love with. Would kill and die for her in a heartbeat. I think those phrases accurately describe our Longtooth and Midnight."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm sure she's a nice girl, but aren't they a bit too young to be like this?"

Sirius smiled a genuine smile, "Harry is devoted to Hermione in a way I've never seen. They've been friends for years and their burgeoning relationship has grown their feelings for each other into something beautiful. Have no fear, Andi, they'll be married the day he turns seventeen and it'll be the right thing to do."

To see her happy go lucky cousin so sincere and serious took Andromeda back. Tapping her finger on the outside of her thigh, she nodded. Deciding to trust Sirius' opinion – for now – she headed to the terrace. She and Ted had taken two weeks off for the hols and were heading out to take a walk in the cold sunlit day.

"Andi," Sirius called.

Turning she saw his expression coldly serious, "Don't interfere with Harry and Hermione. It wouldn't be wise."

Taken aback, she nodded again before heading out. Apparently Sirius was taking his godfather role seriously. That was a good thing for all of them.

.oOo.

Harry was just returning from his run and passing through the entry hall when the Grangers and Sirius arrived via portkey. He smiled at the group and exclaimed, "Happy Christmas!"

"Happy Christmas, Harry!" Hermione called. She made to envelop him in a hug, but paused when she saw the sweat soaked shirt and hair. Crinkling her nose, she told him, "After you shower."

The group laughed as he waved and trotted off to the master suite. Twenty minutes later the freshened thirteen year old lord of the manor returned to his guests who had settled in the massive family drawing room. A roaring fire heated the seven hundred square foot room. The Louis XIV design of the room gave it an elegance and beauty that was comfortable and inspiring at the same time. Magical tapestries on the walls depicted real and mythological scenes from the past. Softly glowing fairies huddled in the massive tree, passively feeding on the ambient magic in the room. Floor to ceiling windows were adorned with garlands of pine and holly. The wireless softly reminded all of The First Noel.

Not wanting to interrupt the conversation, Harry silently moved to the divan which Hermione occupied alone. Sliding next to her, he pulled her close as she slid into his side. Their movements were so natural as to be unconscious, like she was meant to be there.

The cuddling didn't go unnoticed.

Sirius, Ted and Andi were discussing the Voldemort problem with Alice and Steven Granger.

"He's the baddest of the bad, true," Ted was saying. "But the underlying attitude has persevered through time; showing up now and again with some boob as the lead fool."

"So it's like anti-Semitism," Steven observed.

Nodding through his tea, Ted agreed. "Very much so. Hitler was the biggest fool in the thirties and forties. Nowadays, in the non-magical world the loudest idiots are showing up in the Middle East. Just like all Germans weren't evil, so too all the Middle Easterners aren't evil." Pointing to his wife, Ted added, "And not all the purebloods are evil."

"But these Death Eaters and their sympathisers are very dangerous."

"Very," Sirius agreed.

"Professor," Steven addressed Minerva, "What's your opinion of this pureblood question?"

"Bunch of rubbish," Minerva replied. "I'm a pureblood for generations uncounted, but my husband was as muggleborn as they come. He is still the best wizard I've ever known."

"Do you see a difference in your classes between the purebloods and non-purebloods?" Alice asked.

"Not really," Minerva replied. After a quick consideration, she added, "I take it back; the purebloods who've bought into this nonsense usually score and perform worse than muggleborns. Those like the missing and unlamented Draco Malfoy thought to rely on their blood status and wealth rather than their abilities to get them by in life."

"Morons," Steven observed under his breath.

"Quite," Minerva agreed.

There was a lull in the conversation as tea was sipped or cider downed. Remus broke the quiet by asking, "Should we open presents now?"

"You waited?" Hermione asked, even though she had known.

A tender expression on his face, Harry replied, "Of course."

"I'm Santa!" Sirius shouted as he bounded to the tree. "Moony! Catch!" A brightly wrapped package sailed over Minerva's head to land neatly in Remus' lap.

"Midnight!" A bright red package with dashing broomsticks floated through the air.

"Minerva!"

"Sirius Black! So help me if you throw that..." Too late, the gold package landed in her lap to grumbles from the professor and giggles from the youngest three celebrants.

Sirius continued in this manner for a few minutes until all gathered had a small pile of presents. Harry and Hermione exchanged a smile when they saw the long, thin package from Sirius. They noticed Minerva inspecting it from her spot across the room.

"She's as much a Quidditch fanatic as Ron," Hermione muttered under her breath.

Harry just smiled.

As the rest of the family tore into their packages, Harry sat back and watched. It was his first real Christmas with family and he wanted to savour every moment.

Turning to Hermione's parents, she saw Tonks explaining a gift to them. "It's a Reveal-All. See, turn it like this and look through it and you can see anyone invisible in the area. Oi! Cousin!" Sirius looked up at Dora. "Disillusion yourself for us, will you ducks?"

Alice gasped as Sirius faded out of sight. Holding the large magnifying glass looking device to her eye, she cried, "I see him!"

Steven was browsing through the self-updating copy of British Football: A Complete History since 1550. The author was a muggleborn footie fanatic. Sirius almost screamed when he saw the book. He purchased two.

Minerva opened the gift from Hermione and stilled. She thought it was one of the numerous books she was usually gifted, but she was wrong. It was a book of photographs. Opening the cover, she gaped to see a reproduction of her wedding picture from over fifty years before.

Pale faced, she looked up to Hermione, "How?"

"I wrote to your sister and family. Professors Flitwick and Sprout provided quite a few pictures as well. After the ones of your family are pictures from this year."

Minerva slowly flipped through the album until she reached the end. Completely overcome, she could only lay the book aside, slowly rise and embrace The Smartest Witch of the Age. After a long moment, she choked, "Thank you."

"It's my pleasure Minerva," Hermione whispered in reply.

Harry watched Andi and Ted open a joint present that was extremely small, a mere envelope.

Andromeda gasped and paled while Ted wrapped a supporting arm about her shoulder. She turned to Sirius, tears in her eyes as she thanked him. Across the room, Dora stood and as she made her way to her parents, asked, "What is it?"

Ted replied for his softly weeping bride. "Sirius has reinstated your mum to the Black Family."

Remus was gifted a certificate for a lifetime supply of Wolfsbane potion from Harry.

Sirius was gifted a replacement pocket watch of the exact make and model as the one Charlus Potter gave him on his seventeenth birthday. Even the inscription was the same. Remus accepted the hug from his best friend as both remembered the giant among men.

Dora was given a chain of finely woven platinum which was repeatedly micro engraved with 'To Thine Own Self Be True'. With a touched expression and the hint of a tear, she thanked her cousin.

"Open this," Hermione prodded Harry.

"In a minute. I want to watch everyone," he replied absently.

Understanding his meaning, she snuggled into his side, doing her best to be patient. Eventually, he acceded to her looks and throat clearing.

Opening the bright green package from Hermione, Harry slowed to enjoy the moment. Eventually, he'd unwrapped the package and was left with a small plain box. Casting a questioning glance at his mate, he opened the lid.

Inside was a crystal orb slightly smaller than a cricket ball. Curious, he reached in to pick it up. As soon as he touched it, he gasped. Drawing his hand back as if burned, he turned to his wife, wide eyed with surprise.

She smiled softly. "I've not named it, but whenever you touch it, you'll feel me and the emotion I feel for you. It's for when we can't be together."

Gasping from the experience of feeling her emotions directly, he threw his arms about her, nearly sobbing. With a sad expression on her face, she held him close, rocking him every so often.

She opened her eyes when another set of arms encompassed the two of them. Sirius had come to them, pulling them into his arms, holding the duo close to his chest.

Over the wireless, the singer extolled all, "...and have yourself a Merry little Christmas, night..."

.oOo.

Christmas Dinner was much less dramatic than the opening of the presents. Good food, a wonderful goose with all the trimmings and a spectacularly burning plum pudding. "Dobby went a bit overboard with the brandy," Harry muttered to Remus on his left.

Conversation was light as the family slowly worked their way through a masterpiece of a meal. Andromeda and Alice were comparing notes from their work. Andi was a healer at St Mungo's so the two were discussing treatments, similarities and differences.

Ted, Steven and Sirius were caught up in a Football discussion. Ted had disclosed his devotion to Manchester United, while Steven was a staunch Hull City Supporter. Sirius attempted to play Switzerland in the discussion as best he could, but failed miserably. Padfoot was not meant to be the arbiter of anyone's disagreements.

Minerva was regaling Hermione with tales from her youth. Hermione had been exchanging letters with Venus, Minerva's sister. In many of the letters, the younger Fraser sister had referenced or alluded to the 'misadventures of our youth' when discussing 'Minnie'. While Hermione wasn't brave enough to address the older woman as 'Minnie', she did ask about their chasing the Silkies, the finding of the 'pirate treasure', hiding from hobgoblins and playing in the stone circle near their home, sometimes with odd consequences.

Dora and Remus were enraptured with each other's company. Once Remus had decided to give the relationship with Tonks a go, he'd thrown himself in the deep end. Being the passionate yet relaxed woman that she was, Dora was more than willing to embrace the handsome man at her side. Currently, she was whispering naughty things in Remus' ear, trying to make Moony blush. She was in for a long day in trying to make a Marauder blush.

What of Harry? Harry sat at the head of the table soaking in it all. He revelled in the experience of true family. Not feeling left out, for he was intimately involved in each of the discussions, he silently sucked the emotion and love in the room into his heart as a healing balm. It was a dressing for his soul, as it were. War was raging again and his actions tore at his humanity. Unfortunately, he couldn't stop what he was doing lest thousands die. By embracing his family,

as he was this day, it allowed him to maintain an anchor to sanity, a tie to his conscience.

So he loved and was loved. All was well.

For now.

.oOo.

Strangely, it was harder for Hermione to sneak into the master bedroom while her parents were at Rowan Hill than when they were at home in Kent. As master of the house, Harry replicated Hermione's ward on 'her bedroom' which would slow down her parents and alert the mistress of the house that she needed to Apparate right away.

Her parents wanted to while the night away with the Family chatting in the drawing room. Minerva was staying through the New Year so the Family would be together for the immediate future. She needed to get away from the castle for a break, she told them all. In truth, she needed to get away from Albus. His presence was a constant irritation to her sensibilities. Albus' persistent good cheer grated at her memories and knowledge of his less than savoury machinations. Hypocrisy didn't sit well on the shoulders of Albus Dumbledore, whether he knew it or not. She didn't tell anyone, but being around him was a physical reminder of her previous failings. To say that she hadn't forgiven herself for being Albus' lapdog was a gross understatement.

Andi and Ted were cuddled on a loveseat next to the fireplace chatting with Remus and Dora. Hermione was somewhat surprised to see the Tonks so accepting of their daughter's relationship with a much older man. Yet, with wizarding lifespans so long, what was a dozen years, really? When a witch or wizard lived to be over one hundred and thirty, what as a few years? Dora was happy and so too was Remus. A parent couldn't ask for more than a decent man to love their daughter with all he had.

Thankfully, Andi and Ted weren't afflicted with the magical community's pervasive fear of Lycanthropy. Remus had pulled his girlfriend and her parents aside earlier the day before, though. He'd wanted to discuss his affliction in a frank and open manner. Explaining the circumstances of his infection, the precautions he

took to ensure he was safe from affecting others. He kept back the animagi who helped him stay sane on those full moon nights. Not wanting to explain how two third year students were able to master an advanced magical feat, he omitted the fact altogether. Harry's subsequent gift of a lifetime supply of Wolfsbane went even further to ease Andi and Ted's mind regarding Remus and his disease.

Around ten or so, Harry yawned widely before announcing, "I'm all done in. 'Night everyone." After giving Hermione a peck on the cheek, The Boy-Who-Lived ambled out of the drawing room towards the master suite. Five minutes later, Hermione repeated the performance, kissing her mum and dad on the cheek before heading to bed.

Ten minutes later, she and Harry were entwined in a passionate embrace.

.oOo.

Boxing Day and the rest of the calendar year passed by in the joyful haze that the holidays usually bring. The elder Grangers found themselves fitting into the rhythm of the Family quite easily. On the twenty ninth, events began to foment a permanent change of life for Steven and Alice Granger.

Sirius had become a news junkie since his exoneration. Every morning found him pouring over the Prophet. He read every article in every edition every day. Off to the side, Steven and Remus had discussed the matter. Steven was of the opinion that Sirius was trying to propel himself back into the ebb and flow of life by sheer force of will.

It was no surprise, therefore, when Sirius snapped open the daily paper that morning of the twenty ninth. What was surprising was the stillness from Padfoot. Usually, he provided a running commentary on the news. Mostly it was comic relief but occasionally, he offered very concise observations on the political landscape of magical Britain.

Therefore, silence from behind the broadsheets of the Daily Prophet was unexpected. Eventually, Sirius asked, "Steven, how far is your place from Faversham?"

Puzzled at the odd question, Steven mused, "Maybe three or four miles. Why?"

Without speaking, Sirius turned the paper round so that the rest of the gathering could see the front page. Dominating the sheet was a large magical photograph of a burning house. Leering sickly out of the centre of the picture was the glittering menace of the Dark Mark.

"This house was on the eastern edge of Faversham," Sirius observed tonelessly.

Harry and Hermione exchanged wide eyed glances while Steven and Alice puzzled through the picture, not connecting the dots just yet.

"I don't understand. What's the matter?"

Andromeda set down her mug of tea and explained the Dark Mark and its significance. After the clarification, a rattled Alice asked, "Who was killed, Sirius?"

Reading the article, Sirius replied, "Gladys and Jerome Gilbright."

Both elder Grangers closed their eyes and crumpled in on themselves in grief. "Oh, God," Alice groaned.

Steven reached out to take his wife's hand. She held on to his as an anchor holds a ship. "They were patients of and friends ours."

Harry turned to Dora and commanded, "Go to Auror headquarters. Find out what leads they have and if any evidence connects this attack to the Grangers. They'll not go home until we're sure it's safe."

Alice blinked when Dora merely nodded, wiped her mouth and headed to the Floo.

Turning to Moony, Harry told him, "Check out the area. See if there have been any disturbances in the wards about their house." Mimicking his girlfriend, Remus nodded obediently before heading out of the room.

Turning to his in-laws, Harry began with an apology. "I'm sorry that this is happening. I don't know for sure if this is a message that they know where you are or not, but if it is..." the implication was heavy in the silence.

Minerva chimed in, "This is a standard practice of the Death Eaters. Terror is their most useful weapon and by attacking near your home, they may very well be trying to tell us all that they can kill you as soon as you step out from your wards."

Sirius picked up the thread. He and Harry had discussed this situation back in October, so he knew his godson's wishes. "It may not feel like it right now, but the Blood War is starting again. Since your family is so intricately tied with us," he gestured to himself, Harry and Minerva, "You're known to associate with those who oppose Voldemort. You may not be able to go home."

"You're welcome to stay here for the rest of your life, if needs be," Harry proclaimed.

"But..." Alice weakly objected. Her protests were halted by the large warm hand of her husband coming to rest on her shoulder.

"Love," he reassured her, "It'll be alright. Homes can be rebuilt. Careers can be revived. Gladys and Jerome are gone forever. If it keeps you and Pumpkin safe, we'll stay here for the rest of our natural lives."

Alice reflected on the wisdom of her husband before nodding jerkily.

In an attempt to be soothing, Sirius observed, "Dora should be able to give us some insight on what the investigators have found. She may tell us that our fears are unfounded. Remus may also ..."

Sirius' speculation was interrupted by a loud CRACK from the entry hall. Bolting from his chair, Harry sprinted out of the room, changing form as he ran. Before he cleared the doorway, Midnight leapt through the hallway, Longtooth and Padfoot on his heels.

Seconds later, the animagi shifted back to their human form as they found a wounded Remus nursing a burnt shoulder as he sat on the floor, gritting his teeth against the pain.

"Four Death Eaters. They were waiting just outside the ward boundary. I got two of them, but the third used a wide area Flagrante curse that caught my arm," he nodded at his smoking shoulder.

Before anyone could say anything, Andromeda drew her wand and was casting the Numbing charm. Gently levitating the injured werewolf, she murmured, "I'll pop over to the hospital for some of the Benson's Burn salve. Set you up in a jiffy. Let's just get you to your room for now, eh?"

Everyone was quiet as Andi took Remus to his room. Taking advantage of the silence, Sirius turned to Hermione, a gleam in his eye. "So. Pumpkin?"

Hermione alternated glaring at Sirius, her father and the laughing Harry at her side.

.oOo.

It turned out that the Aurors were completely unaware of the proximity of the Granger household to the attack site. When Dora had asked the lead investigator if there were any connections between the attack and the Granger house, he'd been completely befuddled why he should care about a muggleborn third year's parent's house. When the Metamorph Auror had casually dropped the words, "Girlfriend," "Harry Potter," and "Sirius Black," in that order, the lead investigator became much more focused on the investigation and this possible aspect of the crime.

Blood prejudice aside, he was a good man. Once he started investigating the link, much of the evidence at the Gilbright's house began to make sense. The addition of the aftermath of the skirmish Remus had with the Death Eaters cemented the issue. Sirius had gone to talk with the Auror, Joseph Kildargen, and told him that the Grangers were in a very safe place and if needed, they could come in for a discussion with the Auror. He would not be allowed to travel to them. The little bit of subterfuge of Sirius talking to the Auror and not mentioning Potter properties helped confuse the issue further.

Harry had been adamant. No one was coming in his wards unless they were family. No exceptions. He'd spent over forty thousand galleons upgrading the wards to the point where the experts at Gringotts and the Ministry couldn't penetrate the estate's defences.

The paper of the thirtieth had more interesting news. Severus Snape had been spotted in Bavaria.

.oOo.

The New Year's Eve party hosted by the Longbottoms of Green Hills was the social event of year. Sirius had finagled an invitation for himself, Andi and Ted as well as Remus and Dora. Harry had asked Neville, via owl, if Hermione's parents would be welcome. The excited reply from the Longbottom scion had warmed Harry's heart. It also increased the load of his guilt. Harry still felt like a heel for being so dishonest with his friends at school. The Twins were on the right trail and when they could protect their minds, Harry and Hermione would disclose the full extent of their secret.

Just as they had committed at the beginning of the year, Harry and Hermione did what they could to be better friends to Neville and Luna. Hermione had finally found a girlfriend who wasn't a complete idiot and could hold a discussion about topics that ignored cosmetics, hygiene and boys. Well, mostly avoided boys. Luna had started puberty without a mother. She turned to Hermione to ask the questions a girl becoming a woman would ask her mother.

Neville's blooming personality was nothing short of a miracle to Harry. Neither Potter could pinpoint the reason why Neville was changing so radically, but it was good to see the habitually insecure boy asserting himself more and more.

The entire family was gathered in the entry hall while wearing their finest robes. They'd gone en masse to Twifflett's, purveyors of fine Wizarding Wear. The store manager had quailed at the sight of nine persons sauntering into his formalwear section. Sirius had beckoned to the knock-kneed man and told him, "My purse is open to whatever my friends and family require. Anything."

The leaden feeling in the manager's belly changed into an avaricious grin.

Silk, satin, lace and the best linen swept in front of the ladies. The gentlemen took their cue, sitting in the waiting area until they were summoned. Steven had come prepared. Pulling out a fresh pack of

cards, he asked, "Gentlemen are you all familiar with the wonderful entertainment known as poker?"

Remus' wolfish side showed up in his grin as he conjured a green felt covered table.

"Stakes?" Sirius asked. Harry reached for his purse, looking forward to fleecing his godfather.

.oOo.

Steven was the big winner. He came out three hundred galleons ahead. Harry was fifteen galleons up and Remus and Ted were only five short. Sirius was three hundred and five galleons light. No one cared as they were laughing and carrying on like loons. Four hours after the ladies had been sequestered by the tailors, the men were summoned for their fittings.

"Shouldn't we get to pick our clothes?" Remus asked.

Ted, Harry and Steven rolled their eyes at Moony's naiveté.

"Remus, our outfits are to complement their outfits. We only get to pick our boxers. Be glad they're letting us pick anything at all."

Shrugging it off, the men went in for their fittings. Forty five minutes later, they were done and Sirius was an additional twelve hundred galleons poorer.

"Can I see your dress?" Harry asked Hermione as they waited for everything to be settled.

"No."

"Please?"

"No. Stop asking."

Harry pouted for a minute before she smiled at him. Leaning in, she told him, "I bought something else. Something besides my dress."

With a lascivious grin, Harry asked, "Something your mum didn't see?"

She nodded. Very deliberately, she licked her lips.

Harry groaned. "Goddammit Padfoot, hurry the fong up."

"Let's get some food," Andromeda suggested.

"What do you say to Ethiopian? We know a place just down the road that's very good," Alice asked the group.

"Harry's buying!" Hermione announced.

The very horny and frustrated Boy-Who-Lived glared at his wife for a second before brightly agreeing with her. "I've never eaten Ethiopian. What's it like?"

.oOo.

The party was rollicking. Green Hills was an estate nearing the size of Rowan Hill. The house was large, having a ballroom rivalling the great hall of Hogwarts. A classical quartet was set up in the entry hall, soft strings of Corelli and Mozart wafting through the crowds. A Swing Band was playing in the ballroom, a large crowd of witches and wizards dancing the year away.

The Family arrived on the front lawn. Hurrying in the house to escape the threatening sleet, they were greeted by the bejewelled Dowager Lady Longbottom. Augusta was a tall woman whose youthful beauty had fallen to a sharply intimidating expression. Greeting Sirius first, she then turned to Harry. "It is very good to meet you, Mr Potter. My grandson has spoken highly of you in his correspondence home this term. I look forward to the day when you both assume your rightful positions as peers of the realm and Lords of our magical society."

Completely nonplussed, Harry merely smiled before bowing over Lady Augusta's outstretched hand. As the Family moved into the house, Harry muttered to Hermione, "What was all that?"

"I've no idea. We'll ask Neville later." Hermione waved and smiled to Susan Bones across the room.

"I want a drink."

"Harry."

"I know," The Boy-Who-Lived grumbled. "Doesn't mean I don't want one."

Turning to him with a bright smile, Hermione beamed, "Dance with me?"

Harry smiled before agreeing, "I'd be delighted."

It was a traditional waltz being played; the horns were muted as the strings dominating the rise and fall of the music. He held her close, she melding herself to his form in an intimacy as powerful as their joining. Her dress was from another age. The empire gown was tastefully embroidered with gold thread overtop a midnight blue dress. There was the hint of resemblance to her gown from the Yule Ball and it was on purpose. They were celebrating tonight. A new life: new family and new choices. Off the shoulder, snug from her bosom down to her ankles, the dress showed off all the assets Hermione wanted her man to see.

Unfortunately her figure wasn't what it would be, otherwise, she'd have gone with the strapless silk creation her mother ended up selecting. Three more years and I'll pop his eyes out of his head. Little did she know, she already did 'pop his eyes out of his head'.

Truly, she was a beautiful young woman – when she took the time to condition and tame her hair. On the sly, she'd used an Orthodontic spell to straighten and shrink her teeth a few days after returning to the past. Her parents hadn't commented, but she'd seen both of them do double takes after noticing.

The nutrition potions she and Minerva had been forcing down Harry's throat had helped her husband as well. He'd grown three inches in the winter term. He now topped her by an entire one quarter inch whereas when they'd married, she was still slightly taller than him.

That train of thought is the way of madness, she reminded herself. Every time she considered Harry's height or weight, she zeroed in on the Dursleys and their mistreatment of her man. It was not a safe line of thought for any involved. Homicide was a familiar topic in

Hermione's mind when contemplating Vernon, Petunia and Dudley Dursley.

Pushing the contemptible excuses for humanity to the farthest reaches of her voluminous brain, Hermione focused on the wizard in her arms. When she stopped to consider how much she loved this young man in her arms, her breath always caught in her chest.

He was brave. He was kind. He was honest. He was determined. He was gentle. He was funny. He was smart. He was in love with her.

He could be irritable. He could be annoying. He could be lazy. He could be sharp. He could be profane. He could be moody.

But in the end, Harry James Potter was the only person in the universe who had or could touch Hermione Jane Granger's heart in that special way. He touched her in the way that seemed predestined by God Himself. She loved him: the good, the bad and the ugly; all the pieces and parts that made up her Harry. He was hers and she was his.

The moment was broken as the band wound up into an upbeat tune. Twirling her, Harry laughed aloud for the sheer pleasure of being alive. Outside of his arms, life was pretty much shit. But in his arms was his entire reason for existing. Her name was Hermione and he loved her.

.oOo.

"Muggles! Who the bloody hell brought muggles?"

"Fong," Harry muttered as he turned toward the sound of the shouting.

Pushing through the crowd, Hermione drafting behind him, Harry broke through the circle surrounding Steven and Alice to find Sirius standing over an older man who was pinching his bleeding nose.

"Listen to me you worthless piece of shite," Sirius hissed at the man. "These are my friends, personal friends, mind you. In fact," standing up straight and tall, Sirius cut a much more imposing figure. "In fact," he reiterated, "I claim them as protected by House Black."

Gasps from the crowd accompanied expressions of befuddlement from Harry and Hermione. Sirius wasn't done yet, though. Turning to the newly arrived Lady Augusta, he scolded her, "I'm disappointed in you, Lady Augusta. After what Frank and Alice went through, you invite this scum into your home," he gestured to the now standing man, blood still dripping from his injured nose.

Somehow managing to be indignant and shamed at the same time, Lady Augusta glared at the offensive man until he withdrew, hopefully for the evening. Turning her formidable gaze to the Lord Black, she tilted her head, acknowledging his rebuke, but not dignifying it with a reply. Stalking off she let the crowd disperse muttering and murmuring as it went.

Hermione moved to her parents and Harry noticed for the first time that Steven had blood on his hand. Harry had assumed, incorrectly, that Sirius had struck the offending man. One look at the expression on Steven Granger's face made Harry rethink everything he'd ever thought about the man. He was definitely going to ask him what he'd done before dental school. Harry wasn't putting the SAS beyond the man right then.

Alice was visibly shaken. Apparently much more had been said than what Harry had heard. As Hermione wrapped her mum in a hug, Harry scanned the immediate surroundings for any further threat. Seeing no one lingering, he moved to his godfather.

"Padfoot?" he asked.

Still angry, Sirius pointed in the direction the offending wizard had retreated. "That scumbag is Ricardo Lestrage, father of Rudolphus and Rabastan. He's also the father in law of the lovely Bellatrix."

Completely taken aback, Harry wondered aloud, "How did he get in here?"

"I've no idea."

"He came with Theodorix Jugson."

Turning to the voice, Harry found Neville standing there, pale and sweating. "Gran is screaming at Jugson right now. I'd stay away

from the library for a bit. After she's done with him...well, there won't be much left."

The four men stood in silence contemplating the news. There was an uncomfortable moment when Harry and Neville both realized that Harry must know all about the incapacitation of Frank and Alice Longbottom. Ignoring the problem for the moment, Harry told his friend. "Give your Gran our regrets. I think we're going to get out of here."

Nodding, Neville replied, "I understand. Did you ever see Luna? She's around here somewhere. Last I saw her, she and Newt Scamander were sequestered in a corner."

Slightly smiling, Harry clapped Neville on the shoulder, "No, I didn't. Give her our best."

"Will do."

Turning to follow Sirius and Steven, Harry almost ran over Albus Dumbledore.

The twinkling blue eyes bored into Harry's green. "Good evening, Harry." Looking over the shoulder of The Boy-Who-Lived, the aged Headmaster added, "Sirius, Mr Granger how are you this evening?"

"We're well Albus. You'll excuse us, we're just leaving."

"So soon?" the old wizard pressed.

Annoyed with all that had happened and his patience dwindling, Sirius snapped, "Yes, Albus. We're leaving now."

Harry moved to follow his godfather, but was stopped by a hand on his arm. Surprised that the Headmaster had laid a hand on him, Harry turned back to face Dumbledore.

"Harry, I'd like to have a discussion with you when school starts back. Please come by my office the day after term starts."

Sirius had turned around as soon as he realized that Dumbledore had waylaid his godson. "What would you like to discuss with my

godson, Albus?" There was a definite hint of menace in Padfoot's tone.

Brushing off the implied threat like an annoying insect, Dumbledore replied, "Oh, this and that. Nothing to be worried about."

That blasé statement sent alarm bells ringing in Harry, Sirius and even Steven's ears. "Harry," Sirius addressed his best friend's son, "Don't go anywhere near the Headmaster's office unless it's for a school related issue and your head of house is with you. In fact," he continued in an acerbic tone, "Contact me before you go. I don't want you alone with the Headmaster for any reason."

Harry's eyes were wide by the time Sirius was done with his rant. Slowly turning to the Headmaster, Harry saw the old man regarding Sirius with a thoughtful expression.

The old man's piercing gaze shifted from Sirius to Harry and for a long moment, Harry stood transfixed. He felt nothing against his mind's shields which Harry was frantically reinforcing.

Without saying a word, Dumbledore walked away, disappearing into the crowd. "Fuck," Sirius muttered. Glancing at the other two men, he nodded toward the entry hall, "Let's get the girls and Moony and get the hell out of here."

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to all who reviewed the first seven chapters. Story status can be found on my Author's page on FanFiction (dot) net.

2. Recommendation for the chapter is Full Circle by Crazy Mishka. Find it on Portkey.

3. I felt it was important for Sirius to tell the Grangers his story. For one, it's an incredibly sad story of loss, death, betrayal and madness. On the other, it drops the Grangers in the Story at the deep end. Let's just say that their world is going to significantly change and leave it at that.

4. It may seem like I'm picking on the Weasley's but I'm not. They have publicly aligned themselves against Voldemort and his forces

and there are consequences for doing so. If this were real life, it wouldn't be a game or macho posturing. It'd be life and death. Most of the families in canon that had publicly taken a stand against evil have been decimated: Potter, Bones, Prewett and others are mentioned in the books. Granted, the disaster of Molly and Arthur's death would most likely be classified as 'unfortunate' rather than 'deliberate', but they wouldn't have been in the courtroom had the family not believed in standing against the darkness.

5. If you haven't figured it out, all the carols, quotes and whatnot have meaning in this story. It's not random selection on my part.

6. I said this in the chapter, but it's quick and most may have missed it. It's my opinion that the Fidelius in Godric's Hollow was not to hide James and Lily, but rather to hide Harry. Sure, Voldemort wanted to kill the elder Potters on principle, but the real target was Harry. Hence, he was the one being hidden and his parents went with him.

Chapter 9

"This should be fun."

Hermione gave her husband a sad smile as she wrapped her arm in his. After the disastrous ending of the New Year's Eve party at Green Hills, the inner circle of the Family had taken counsel with each other on and off for the rest of the hols. Sirius explained his vehement reaction to Dumbledore's 'request' for a meeting. "I was trying to pull attention off you," he indicated to Harry with his chin, "And put it on me. I wanted him thinking about why I mistrusted him so much so as to possibly cover up any irregularities he may have noticed about Midnight."

"You know that's only a temporary reprieve," Minerva opined. "He's not diverted for long."

Thinking aloud, Harry muttered, "So what's the story?"

Sirius immediately replied, "Deny, deny, deny. It'll give us all a chance to regroup and develop a plan once we know his intentions."

"That sounds the safest course," Remus agreed. "Minerva? Thoughts?"

"It should do. He hasn't confided in me, but that's not unusual. We all know how close to the vest Albus keeps his thoughts."

After a moment's silence, Sirius exclaimed, "Look, there's not anything Albus can do. Yeah, he may have suspicions. He can even know that something is wrong with our boy here, but he can't do anything."

"He can make life hard for him," Dora interjected.

"How? Expel me?" Harry asked.

This seemed to stump her. All those present thought about Harry's question. "If he were serious about making life difficult for you," Remus considered, "He would go public with his concerns. Unless he's mad, he'll not do that. True he's the Chief Warlock and Supreme Mugwump, but he can't do anything to you short of trying to muddy your reputation."

"Like I give a fong about that." Harry snorted.

"What about an Umbridge type situation?" Dora asked.

"That's entirely different," Hermione countered. "If push comes to shove, we leave school. We don't need Hogwarts or Dumbledore anymore."

Unfortunately, that was the truth. Their first time through the timeline, Harry had nowhere else that he felt he could turn. Sirius was still wanted by the authorities, Remus was chasing over hell's half acre in pursuit of some chimera for Dumbledore and Harry didn't feel right asking Hermione for succour. In addition, the Ministry was conducting its persecution of The Boy-Who-Lived, so Harry felt hemmed in on all sides.

Life was very different now.

His family was forming about him, his finances were secure and he had his mate firmly at his side. The ministry was courting him in a very indirect way. Fudge had been effusive in his support of Harry during the aftermath of Snape's trial. Dumbledore's reputation was in ruins after the Potion Master's conviction and escape. With Lucius Malfoy a pile of ashes and Dumbledore flailing for purchase, Fudge had decided to glom onto The Boy-Who-Lived. The Minister for Magic's heavy handed praise of Harry had caused more than one eye roll at Rowan Hill.

"What about her?" Remus asked as he pointed to Hermione. This caused everyone to still while they considered the point. Expulsion wasn't a serious threat. Hermione had already begun laying the groundwork with her parents regarding the Headmaster. When they went shopping with Sirius, Hermione had told Alice how the Headmaster had dropped Harry with his relatives, subsequently failing to check up on him. Alice's perpetually cheerful expression had hardened to near hatred when Hermione told her that Harry's first Hogwarts letter had been addressed to 'The Cupboard Under the Stairs'.

The nature of Harry and Hermione's relationship as well as some carefully phrased innuendo by the Headmaster could very well disrupt Hermione's life, though. At the same time, she was

heartened by Harry's evaluation that they may be able to tell her parents the truth about the time travelling. Maybe. Life seemed to be very much up in the air right now.

Still, it was a weak point in their defences. To protect the Grangers from the burgeoning Death Eater threat, Steven and Alice were moving behind the considerable wards of Rowan Hill. However, to protect them from the seemingly benign threat of the Headmaster and his machinations, they were powerless. The only weapon they had against the Headmaster was the truth. Fear kept that shaft in the quiver, though.

Currently, Steven and Alice were at their home packing for the extended stay at Rowan Hill. Steven had even added his old typewriter to the pile to be brought to Wales. He was hoping to get some work done on the detective story that'd been bouncing around his brain for the past five years. Alice was directing Dobby for the safe storage of their valuables. By the time the day was done, the Granger home in Kent was as empty as the day it was first built in 1736.

Andi and Ted had returned home after heartfelt embraces. Life was starting back for them. The hospital beckoned to Andi while Ted's job at Gringotts, where he was a tax lawyer, demanded his presence. They had sat down with Sirius to discuss the ward schema at their home. The Tonks' lived far out in Cornwall, near Bodmin Moor. This worked to their advantage and to their disadvantage. They had no close neighbours to whom they could flee or request help. At the same time, any attackers would have to walk across fairly open land once their homes defences were breached.

Harry provided each of the elder Tonks with a discreet necklace portkey to Rowan Hill to be used in case of emergency. Andromeda had looked at Harry with a puzzled expression before hooking the clasp about her neck. He didn't bother giving Dora a portkey; she already had one.

Now it was time to return to Hogwarts. Harry and Hermione had received a few letters from Neville and Luna. They were the rambling 'here's what's going on' letters one receives from friends when separated. Hermione had giggled through the first letter she'd received from Luna. Harry swore that his wife was more fourteen now than she'd ever been the first time through.

The four friends passed the time on the Express in a heavily warded compartment. Harry slept a good part of the way while Hermione explained the basics of Arithmancy to Luna. By the time Harry awoke as the train crossed Hadrian's Wall, Luna and Hermione were hip deep in advanced calculus. Neville must have given up some time before, as he had his nose buried in a biography of a famous herbologist.

Squeezing Hermione's thigh, he muttered, "Going to the toilet." Not pausing in her discussion with Luna, she flashed him a smile.

Meandering through the car, Harry was struck by the carefree attitude displayed by the bulk of the students. In a strange way, he was grateful that ninety nine percent of the student body was completely unaware of the kick starting of the Second Blood War. After washing his hands, Harry opened the door, only to immediately duck under the flash of a spell. Before he hit the ground, his wand was in his hand, a Stunning spell being cast. As his bum bounced off the floor of the toilet, Harry's assailant crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

Harry was shocked to see it was Alicia Spinnet.

Disillusioning the Stunned young woman, he levitated her into a nearby empty compartment. A few quick spells locked the doors and turned the windows opaque. Next, he trussed her up before waking her. Before the witch could react, Harry cast a series of Compulsion charms. Taken individually, they were insignificant compared to the Imperius curse. However, when an ArchMage casts six in rapid succession the result is usually impressive.

"Why did you try to kill me?"

"The voice told me to," Alicia replied in a confused tone. She wasn't the mindless drone that is caused by Veritaserum, but she wasn't quite herself, either.

"What did the voice say?"

"I had to kill Harry Potter."

Thinking quickly, Harry asked, "When did you first hear the voice?"

"After we did some last minute Christmas shopping in Diagon Alley."

"Crap," Harry muttered. "Imperius from the middle of a crowd." Sighing, he silently stunned his Quidditch teammate. A deft wand movement sent a Message charm to Minerva, "Alicia Spinnet under the Imperius. Contact St Mungo's so as to have a specialist standing by for our arrival."

After laying Alicia out in a comfortable position, he locked the door before heading to find Hermione. Motioning to her from outside the compartment, she ended up following him back to Alicia.

"Oh, no. What happened?" she asked as Harry opened the door to the compartment. After Harry explained, Hermione performed a few basic diagnostics which supported his conclusion.

"Who's behind all this?" she asked as she sat heavily on the bench. "The Death Eater attacks and now this. Voldemort hasn't been resurrected yet..." she trailed off, her face reflecting horror.

"What?" Harry asked.

"What if he's been resurrected already?"

Fear coursed through him at the idea. Shaking her head, Hermione countered herself, "No. He's no reason to abandon the path he used last time. With the notification wards we erected over the last few weeks, Voldemort and Snape can't come closer than twenty kilometres to Little Hangleton before we know about it."

She settled herself, hope riding high. When Harry didn't immediately agree, doubt crept into her hope, polluting and corrupting it. Eventually, she asked, "I'm right aren't I?"

Shaking his head, Harry replied, "I sure hope so."

.oOo.

The feast was ashes in Harry's mouth as he contemplated Hermione's fear. Have we forged things up so badly that we've lost all control? was the idea reverberating about his consciousness. This was closely followed by, Dear God; don't let them all die again.

They ate their meal in silence. All the students had been held on the train until Dumbledore, Minerva, Madame Pomfrey and a healer from St Mungo's removed Alicia. "There're three courses of action to break the Imperius curse on a person," Hermione had explained to him so many years from now.

"The easiest way to break the curse is to kill the one who cast the spell. The second is a highly dangerous Legilimancy probing in which there's an even chance the victim could become a vegetable. The third option is an intensive course in potions and layered spell work that will eventually free the victim."

"How long?"

She had shrugged, "Few weeks. Few months. It depends on the victim and their will."

At the other end of the Gryffindor table, Oliver was bemoaning the state of his Quidditch team. "We had it in the bag. Crushed Slytherin. The 'Puffs have no chaser line and the 'Claws have no seeker or keeper. We had it in the bag." Harry was sure the seventh year Quidditch Captain was going to be seeking a bottle later this evening.

As soon as they could, the Potters escaped the great hall. With liberal use of Warming charms, they huddled on their favourite bench by the lake. It was to be a long night.

.oOo.

The next morning, they 'happened' to 'bump into' Professor Lupin on the way to breakfast. "Good morning, you two. I'd like to chat with you after breakfast if you have a minute."

Nodding, they agreed. Sitting next to Fred and George, Harry piled his plate with a standard English breakfast. "How's Alicia?" Fred asked.

Harry shrugged, "She was out of it on the train. Haven't heard anything since."

"I'll ask Professor McGonagall," Hermione volunteered. Wiping her mouth, she headed to the front of the great hall. After a quick discussion, she headed back, her face covered in a frown.

"Not good," Harry muttered to himself.

"They expect a long recovery," Hermione told the Twins. "Apparently there was a compulsion-type potion on top of the Imperius."

Thoroughly confused, Harry asked the question puzzling not only the students, but quite a few healers at St Mungo's, "How?"

"They don't know."

At this point, Remus headed toward the entry hall from the front table. He caught the Potters' gaze before giving a quick nod. Finishing up their meal, Harry and Hermione bid the Twins a hasty farewell before taking a roundabout way to their Defence professor's quarters.

After closing the door and casting a Privacy ward, Hermione asked, "What's going on?"

Remus scrubbed his chin before he told them, "I talked with Sirius last night. Later, I caught up with Minerva. We're all of the opinion that it may be time for you two to leave Hogwarts."

Harry was dumbfounded, but Hermione merely leaned back onto the sofa, nodding her head in understanding. "We're very exposed here and this resurgent Death Eater activity is bound to swarm to Harry."

"Exactly. Based on the attack in Faversham, they've targeted your parents. Yesterday shows that they are now using your classmates to attack you. At Rowan Hill you'll be safe and we can venture out when we deem it necessary."

"We?" Harry asked, his surprise evident.

"Yes, 'we'. The only reason I took this job was to help you in any way I could. At the time, I believed that I had to protect you from Sirius. Though that isn't still true, the point remains. If you're not here, I don't need to be here."

Hermione frowned, "What about the students? The fifth and seventh years need you, Remus. You're the best Defence teacher they've ever had."

His face hardening, Remus replied, "I understand that, but to be brutally honest, that's Albus' problem. Not mine. He's let this inanity regarding the Defence professors to go on for far too long. If the position is cursed, which I find extremely unlikely, then he needs to prove that he's the most powerful wizard in the kingdom and do something about it. Otherwise, he ought to find a worthwhile instructor that he can hire long term. He and I both knew that I would only be able to last the year. My Lycanthropy is bound to get out eventually and then I get the sack."

The room was quiet as all digested the news. "Damn, Moony," Harry muttered. "Thanks."

Remus nodded at the sentiment.

Neither Harry or Hermione came to an immediate conclusion on what they should do. The slacker part of Harry wanted to get the hell out of there as fast as humanly possible, blowing a raspberry at Dumbledore the whole way. The rest of him was divided. He realized that his presence at Hogwarts was a sham; neither Potter needed the education. At the same time, he was in a place to protect the youth of magical Britain – from themselves if needs be.

"That's not your problem, love. Not your responsibility," Hermione whispered from his side.

Closing his eyes as he leaned on the couch, Harry could only smile. She knew him so well...

"Saving people thing, huh?"

She didn't reply, merely smiled sadly.

"Let me think on it Moony. These kids here haven't done anything wrong, If Fucknut up in his tower continues on his path, we'll end up with Alecto and Amycus Carrow teaching here. Who'll protect the students then?"

"Minerva."

Shaking his head, Harry mused, "She's only one person. I'm sure Filius would jump into the fray as well, but to say they'd be outnumbered is a joke."

"I'll quote your lovely bride, 'It's not your problem or responsibility'."

"Let me think on it." Clapping his hands while he wore an exaggerated expression of excitement, Harry squealed, "We've an appointment to see the Headmaster!"

.oOo.

Minerva strode down the Headmaster's hallway, a witch with a purpose. At her side was Harry Potter. They were going to meet the sometimes selfless, sometimes self-interested, but always manipulative Albus Dumbledore.

It was evident that Harry was running through all his Occlumency exercises. His face was blank, his movement minimalistic and there was no trace whatsoever of apprehension. Despite his resentment and protestations, she knew that Harry craved the acceptance and approval of the old Headmaster. She also knew that he was unlikely to receive it. Albus Dumbledore was a very strong willed wizard. That trait had served him well through the Thirties and Forties in the Grindewald war. It had also served him well in the First Blood War. In the trenches of the melee that is commonly called British Magical Politics, his indomitable will served him well, also.

When dealing with others who had opinions or ideas that weren't exactly in line with his own views of the world, though, his strong will tended to more of a hindrance than a help. She had no idea how they were going to make it out of this meeting with their cover intact.

"I hope it doesn't backfire, not having Sirius here," Harry mused. After discussing the situation over the hols, the Family decided it would be best for Sirius to not attend the meeting. His presence was bound to be provocative which would definitely lead to a situation none desired. Harry was sure that Sirius was pacing in the entry hall as he waited back at Rowan Hill.

Remus had relayed the conclusion of their 'do we stay or do we go' discussion to Minerva causing her to be even more proud of 'her'

children than she had been before. They were true Gryffindors, standing up for what was right, cost them what it may. Hopefully, this confrontation wouldn't cost too much.

Hopefully.

Approaching the gargoyle which led to the Headmaster's office, Minerva muttered, "Liquorice." Not bothering to halt her stride, she headed up the stairs. In her head, she found herself singing The Battle of the Braes. The old Scottish war song reminded her of what a few can do when united and strong. It steadied her nerves and steeled her resolve.

Harry was doing his best to keep an open mind, yet every fibre of him screamed to attack before he was in turn attacked. After a deep breath, he followed Minerva into Albus' den.

.oOo.

"Come in Minerva, Harry."

"It is so creepy when he does that," Harry muttered under his breath.

Dumbledore chuckled, amused at Harry's comment. Shrugging while giving an embarrassed smile, Harry moved to the chair indicated, Minerva sitting next to him.

"Sorry."

"Not to worry, Harry. I'm glad you've the courage to speak your mind."

There was a long pause as they all sat in quiet contemplation. Harry had decided that he would not succumb to the Headmaster's standard tactic of using silence to force his students to say more than they had planned. Most people hated the 'uncomfortable silence' and would give into the urge to say something – anything – to break the tension.

Eventually, Dumbledore rumbled, "Harry, I've called you here today because I'm very worried about you."

There was another bout of enforced quietude while Harry stared at Fawkes who was snoozing in the corner.

Eventually, Dumbledore continued, "You've had a hard lot so far Harry, harder than most and I know it. It's pained me over the years to be forced to sit back watching you suffer your trials."

Gritting his teeth, Harry swallowed his rage. Very few knew the details of the abuse he'd suffered at the hands of the Dursleys. Hermione, of course knew the whole story, Remus and Sirius knew pieces and parts of the story and Minerva none at all. Based on the discussion he'd had with Steven Granger, the male dentist Granger and his better half had sussed out the substance, but not the details of the events of his 'childhood'. He talked about it with no one. Now, Albus Dumbledore was all but admitting that he was aware of the abuse Harry had suffered at the hands of his relatives the entire time it was happening. Fucker. No wonder his first Hogwarts letter had been addressed to 'The Cupboard Under The Stairs'.

In a moment of clarity, Harry realized that life seemed to be repeating itself. Once again, Dumbledore was painting himself a victim of Harry's suffering. Just like the end of fifth year the first time through, the Headmaster was pushing all Harry's buttons to achieve an end of his own making. Little did Albus realize that his game was known and thus the deception uncovered. The old Headmaster sighed, taking Harry's tense frame for shame, not rage.

"Harry, it's not your fault that your family has been so unpleasant..."

"Headmaster, would you please get to the point. I'd rather not discuss my relatives."

"You've done nothing wrong, Harry..."

"I'm very aware of that, Professor. Please, get to the point."

Dumbledore nodded sadly, his condescension palpable. Only Minerva's consoling hand on his arm kept Harry in his chair.

"As I said, I'm concerned about your wellbeing. After your unpleasant upbringing, I'm not sure that Sirius is the best choice for a guardian. Your behaviour has altered since he entered your life and the changes haven't always been for the best."

"Professor, I'm not sure how this is any of your business," Harry began.

"True, it's none of my business," the old man interrupted. "But I was a close friend of your parents and I'd like to think that we're close as well. I care, Harry and that's why I'm telling you this. You never had a lot of friends, but you've become even more isolated."

"Because I'm not friends with Ron Weasley anymore?" Harry spat. Minerva's hand tightened on his forearm causing Harry to subside.

"Partly. You've withdrawn from those about you and don't reach out to your peers."

Utterly confounded, Harry turned to Minerva looking for some kind of sanity. Since coming back in time, Harry had reached out to more people in a short amount of time than he'd ever done in his life. Finding a bewildered expression on her face as well, Harry turned back to the Headmaster, stunned.

"Harry, I think it best for you to live away from your godfather. His anger towards me at the Longbottoms was shocking in its intensity. That isn't healthy. Are you ever afraid when with him? Has he ever hurt you?"

"You're unbelievable," Harry whispered. Gaining strength, Harry told the old man, "I was whipped bloody at the Dursleys and you never intervened. Sirius is one of the best men I've ever known and now you want to 'help' me. Headmaster, if this is all you've to talk about, I believe this discussion is over."

Minerva freed Harry's arm, a silent agreement that it was time to leave. Before Harry could stand, Dumbledore rumbled, "We are not done, Harry. This is no light matter. I've already raised my concerns with the Child Protective Services at the Ministry. They are calling upon Sirius even now. In order for him to keep custody of you, he'll need to demonstrate his fitness."

Harry began to growl. It was a deep rumbling organic voice born deep in his chest which spread through the room. The entire Family had been wrong. There was a way that Dumbledore could affect Harry. Hermione was not his only weak spot. Sirius, Remus, Dora,

Minerva...all the Family, all those whom Harry loved were possible subjects to be targeted by those who wished to harm The Boy-Who-Lived.

Recognizing that Harry was on the verge of completely losing control, Minerva stood before shoving Harry toward the door of the office. "Leave! Now! Go to my office and await me there." When he didn't leave, but stood there glaring at the Headmaster, she reiterated, "Now Potter!"

After a miniscule nod, Harry departed. He stalked down the hallways to the offices of the head of Gryffindor house. There was one quick detour to the Gryffindor dormitories, however. Collecting two items, a half kneazle cross breed and a person was necessary.

.oOo.

Twenty minutes later, a red faced Minerva McGonagall stormed into her office to find Harry and Hermione Potter waiting for her. The screaming match she'd just had with the Headmaster had driven her direction to Harry out of her mind, so she was a tad surprised to find the two in her rooms. Silently beckoning them to her quarters, she strode through the door and headed directly to her liquor cabinet. Three glasses were half filled with whisky and finished before anyone said anything.

Harry was still red faced with anger. Hermione was pale, but Minerva could tell she was angry as well.

"We're leaving. Between the mounting Death Eater attacks and that long-haired pinhead in his tower, we've had enough," Hermione announced. Indicating two scrolls on Minerva's writing desk, she added, "Those are our resignations from school. May we use your Floo to leave the school grounds?"

"He's not going to let you go. He'll tell the DMLE that you've been kidnapped or some such story."

Harry smiled grimly. "We're headed to the DMLE first and then to the offices of the Daily Prophet. We're going to borrow a page from Sirius' book and use the press to our advantage."

Minerva shook her head. "How did it get so bad?" she lamented.

Hermione approached the older witch before embracing her. "The students need you here, Minerva. Take care of yourself. Please visit often. You know where to find us."

.oOo.

"Hi Mum. Hi Dad."

"Hermione? Why are you here? Are you hurt?" Seeing Harry come in the door behind her daughter, Alice rolled on with her questions, "Harry! Are you hurt sweetie? What happened?"

The Grangers had just sat down to a late lunch with Sirius and Dora when the teens slouched in the family dining room. Sirius sighed, making the connection quickly between the teens' arrival and the supposed outcome of the discussion with the Headmaster.

"Didn't go well, eh?" Harry was surprised to hear the question from Steven Granger. With a glum expression, Harry silently shook his head. Hermione, though, was still furious.

"Did the Child Protective Services come here?" she demanded of Sirius.

With a smirk, Padfoot replied, "They tried. Bounced off the wards three times. An hour or so later, an owl swooped in with a note demanding that I admit them. I ignored it. They didn't seem to understand that I can't admit them, but I wasn't about to disclose that minor point. It's so much more fun this way."

Harry rolled his eyes as he plopped down in his seat. Pouring a glass of lemonade, he took a long draught. It'd been a busy morning. After leaving Minerva's office, they'd popped to the Ministry Atrium. Sending a note to Auror Headquarters brought Dora out to see them. A quick exchange brought them to Rufus Scrimgeour's office.

Harry didn't know the man from a hole in the wall, but didn't like the evaluative look the leonine old Auror gave him.

"What can I do for you, Mr Potter and Miss Granger?" he asked as Tonks let herself out of her boss' office.

"This may be very odd, but we're here to let you know that we've withdrawn from Hogwarts of our own free will. We're under no coercion whatsoever."

The Auror's eyebrows jumped to his hairline, "Er, that is odd. Why..."

Harry chuckled, "Why do we think we're that important?" When Scrimgeour nodded, Harry elaborated, "I've had a fairly unpleasant discussion with the Headmaster and decided to take advantage of my godfather's permission to withdraw from Hogwarts in order to be tutored at home."

Hermione chimed in, "I'll be studying with Harry. My parents gave written permission for me to withdraw as well."

A slight grin formed on Rufus Scrimgeour's face. "I assume you'd like me to test you for the Imperius, Compulsion charms and the like?" Harry nodded this time causing Scrimgeour to chuckle in his turn. "It's a pretty good alibi to have the Head Auror be able to say you're on the up and up." Now Harry smiled, seeing that Scrimgeour would play along.

Forty minutes later, they used Scrimgeour's Floo to head to the Prophet's offices. Investigative reporter James Shanahan took enough notes during their forty minute interview to cover two and a half feet of parchment. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Rita Skeeter three desks away. The animagus cum reporter was fuming because she was unable to eavesdrop due to Hermione's Privacy ward and it was obvious to all and sundry that something juicy was afoot. The Boy-Who-Lived and his girlfriend didn't pop into the Prophet in the middle of the school day for the fun of it.

Drifting out of his reverie, Harry asked, "I'm sorry, I was wool-gathering. What did you say?"

Alice repeated herself, "What happened with the Headmaster?"

Hermione gave a quick synopsis of the discussion, leaving out Harry's conclusion regarding the Headmaster's awareness and complicity in Harry's upbringing.

She needn't have bothered with the omission.

"He knew," the hard voice of Steven Granger announced. "He knew that your relatives mistreated you and he did nothing. That bastard."

Not looking up from his plate, Harry nodded. Hermione wrapped her arm about Harry's shoulders while all at the table absorbed the monstrosity of Steven's statement.

"You'll never set foot in that castle again, Hermione Jane." This time it was Alice.

Hermione nodded her agreement. Turning to Sirius, she scolded the padfooted one. "You need to answer up to the Child Protective Service investigators. You can't ignore them. Eventually, you'll have a warrant issued for your arrest and you'll be back to square one."

"Without the Dementors, though," Dora observed.

"Fine, fine. I'll talk to the nice wizards and witches that want to take my godson away."

Hermione rolled her eyes, huffed and resumed her meal. She didn't notice Harry and Sirius watching her antics with fond expressions.

.oOo.

Later that night, Padfoot received an owl from Moony telling him that he'd given his two week notice Dumbledore hadn't been pleased.

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore didn't rant and rave when angered. He burned with a cold fire. His mannerisms became clipped and his tone formal. Remus had told them in his missive that "You'd have thought I took his woman and his dog by the way he talked to me."

From the security of Harry's arms, Hermione observed, "I'm sure to Dumbledore, Remus was involved in taking the next best thing to a wife and dog; his successor as the 'Leader of the Light'."

"I'm sure there's a joke about country music in here somewhere, I just can't find it," Sirius muttered.

"Hermione, do you have a second?" Alice asked. Beckoning her daughter out of the room, Alice led the way back to the Granger parents' rooms. Harry had Dobby set Steven and Alice into one of the larger suites in the house that had its own sitting room, bedroom, luxury bath and even a small dining area. When the mother and daughter had settled in front of the fire in the sitting room, Alice turned to her daughter as she asked, "How long have you been sleeping with Harry?"

Completely taken aback, Hermione floundered, "Hunh? Er, well, er, we've taken naps together..."

Holding up her hand for Hermione to stop, Alice countered, "Daughter of mine, I know you too well. Show a little respect for me by not lying to me when I know full well that you're not telling the truth. Lest you also forget, I met your father when he and I were ten years old. I never dated any boy or man other than Steven Granger. I know what it's like to be fourteen and completely in love with your chosen one."

Her expression softened as Hermione picked at the hem of her blouse. Finally, the younger woman admitted, "It's wonderful."

"When it's with someone you love, it is wonderful." With a sad smile, Alice asked, "Are you being safe?" When Hermione nodded, Alice let loose a sigh of relief. By her expression, it was obvious an unpleasant thought had just occurred to her. "Harry didn't coerce you into his bed, did he?"

Rolling her eyes at her mother's absurdity, Hermione chastised her parent, "Mother, please. When has anyone made me do something I didn't want to do?"

"True." She sighed again before explaining, "It can be hard sometimes. One day it seems like just yesterday you were a newborn babe in my arms and here we are..."

After a long silence where they watched the pine log fire spit and crackle, Alice told her daughter, "I'm not going to insult you by telling you that because you're only fourteen you aren't equipped to participate in an adult loving relationship." She snorted softly, "You were more mature than most forty year olds when you were four, so your maturity has never been an issue. At the same time, pumpkin,

you are only fourteen and Harry is your first boyfriend. Despite your maturity, you do lack experience." Alice took a steadying breath before baldly stating, "I think you're making a mistake. Please consider slowing your relationship with Harry."

Seeing the colour flushing her daughter's face, Alice pushed on quickly, "I really like him sweetie and if you two end up married in quite a few years," they both chuckled at Alice's emphasis as it dispelled some of the tension in the room, "If you stay together, I'd be very happy to call Harry 'son'."

Screwing up her face and slowly shaking her head, "But honey, Harry was abused as a boy and that breaks something in a person. He'll need to see a psychiatrist or counsellor of some kind. He's not weak or insane, but he's hurt, honey, and he needs help to become well again."

Leaning forward, her elbows on her thighs, Alice softly told her daughter, "You can't fix him, baby. He needs real help. Andromeda can set us up with someone he can talk to..."

Hermione interrupted her mother with a sad smile, "I know very well that I can't fix him, mum. He knows it too. If you haven't figured it out yet, Harry's pretty stubborn so he doesn't adapt to big changes in his life very well. Let's give it some time living here with us, Sirius, Remus and Dora. He needs his family to solidify around him before he can begin to heal." Her open expression hardened for a moment, "But know this, mum, Harry is my top priority over everything else."

Alice was only slightly surprised by this declaration. Expecting a statement along the lines of 'I love him forever!' or 'He needs me!', Alice hadn't imagined such a mature, reasoned statement from her academically inclined daughter. Thinking on the impact of Harry being top priority, Alice cautioned, "Don't do anything rash, sweetheart. Knowing you and from what I know of Harry, neither of you are going to leap before you look," this caused Hermione to smile at the irony of her mother's statement, "But, don't box yourself into a corner."

Hermione was becoming more frustrated as the conversation progressed. She wanted to shout 'Harry and I have been married for almost three years!' but that would disclose The Secret. Looking at her behaviour from her mum's perspective – and with her mum's

knowledge – all of Alice's statements and exhortations were very wise, even restrained in their moderation.

However, Alice Granger didn't have the full story. Not even close to the full story and as a result, Hermione felt so torn that she wanted to cry in frustration.

"We won't, mum," Hermione replied to her mother's well intentioned caution. "We'll be as mature about our relationship as we can be." Standing, she told her mum, "I've a letter to write to Luna, I'll see you at dinner."

.oOo.

BOY-WHO-LIVED HOUNDED BY DUMBLEDORE

"That'll get another reaction," Sirius observed.

"I'm thinking Fawkes'll be here by lunch, tea at the latest," Harry offered as he slathered marmalade on his toast. "We may even be graced with an attempted visit from the Supreme Mugwump, himself."

The roar of the fireplace in the entry hall caused Harry and Sirius to tense. The rest of the household was still asleep or gone. Dora had stumbled through the dining room ten minutes before on her way to the Floo.

Harry and Sirius traded a glance. Neither said a thing, but both shifted forms before slinking out of the dining room. They ran into Remus in the hallway. He was carrying a valise and his pockets were bulging.

"Albus decided that I needn't wait for my two weeks to leave."

Sirius changed back to his human form, "He was that angry?"

"You could say that," Moony replied as he headed for breakfast.

Once they all settled into their meal, Remus cleared his throat. "Harry, I really appreciate you letting me stay here..."

"Remus, if you start getting wonky about staying here rent free, I'm going to curse your bollocks off. You're family; get that through your skull. You have a room or set of rooms in any Potter property until five minutes after you stop breathing. Stop bringing this up," Harry's annoyance broke through his sarcasm.

Swallowing his pride, Remus nodded. "So what's on the agenda for today?"

"Runes? Dunno, let's ask the boss when she wakes up."

After shovelling an enormous amount of porridge and honey in his mouth, Padfoot eventually swallowed it. With an exaggerated sense of excitement, he told his fellow Marauders, "I'm going to play nice with the nice witches and wizards who want to take my godson away." His distaste was evident on his features.

"After today's headlines, I hope they won't be as harsh as they could have been," Harry observed.

Shrugging, Sirius scooped up another enormous spoonful of the sugary oatey goodness masquerading as a breakfast cereal.

Just as he was about to shovel it into his mouth, the sticky mass disappeared. "Sirius Black, if you won't eat like a Christian, you won't eat at all."

The three men turned simultaneously to see a sleep addled Hermione standing in the doorway tapping her wand on her thigh.

"What did you do with my porridge?" Sirius asked in a horrified whisper.

Confused, Hermione replied, "I Vanished it."

His eyes wide as he stared at his empty spoon, Padfoot whispered, "You Vanished my porridge."

Remus chuckled as he forked some eggs. "Padfoot's had a near reverence for porridge all the time I've known him. Don't mess with his porridge."

Sliding into the seat opposite Sirius and next to Harry, Hermione apologized, "Sorry, Sirius. I'll make a deal, you don't eat like Ron Weasley and I won't Vanish your porridge."

"You Vanished my porridge." He was inspecting the underside of his spoon as if the porridge had slithered underneath the spoon to hide.

"Sirius!"

His gaze slowly broke from the empty spoon, "Fine. But no more Vanishing my porridge."

"Fine," Hermione conceded with a sigh.

"Fine," Sirius pouted.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione turned to Harry, "Dad's birthday is next month. Let's go to Diagon to get him something."

"Sure, we'll take the day off."

Not looking up from his meal, Remus told the duo, "I'm coming with you."

"Moony, we don't need bodyguards. I can kick your arse with one hand behind my back."

"What's Alastor say?"

"Fine," Harry pouted, not bothering to shout 'Constant Vigilance!'.

"Fine," Remus rejoined with a smirk.

.oOo.

"How many roads must a man walk down, before you call him a man?"

Harry looked up from the curio he was inspecting. Remus was singing under his breath with a poignancy and sadness he'd never heard from Moony. Harry had always known that Remus' affliction had set him apart from the rest of Wizarding society, but had never seen the rejection from others with his own two eyes. Walking from

shop to shop, he'd seen a few people who obviously knew of Remus' Lycanthropy shy away from him, stubbornly refusing to meet his gaze.

"How many seas must the white dove sail, before she sleeps in the sand?"

A burning hatred boiled up from deep within The Boy-Who-Lived. Remus Lupin was far and away the most decent human being he'd ever known and society treated him like an animal. Remus deserved to be feted for his humanity and giving nature, yet he was shunned. The worst was the children. In a magical appliance shop, a lost young girl had engaged Remus who had happily played with the tow headed witch.

The young girl's mother had hurried over and was on the verge of thanking Remus for watching over her daughter when she noticed the state of Remus' clothes. And his scars. Given the capability of magical medicine, very few injuries leave such heinous marks. The scars, combined with the tatty nature of Remus' clothes were a neon sign to most adult magicals, which screamed: "WEREWOLF."

With a look of fear, the woman whispered in her daughter's ear. Remus closed his eyes in a long blink in order to avoid seeing the change in the girl's expression. For a moment, surprise held the friendly open expression on the girl's face before fear overshadowed all. Moments later, the girl was whisked away.

"Yes and how many times must the cannonballs fly, before they're forever banned? The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind. The answer is blowin' in the wind."

Harry watched Hermione sidle up to their friend. With a sad expression, she wrapped an arm around him before laying her head on his chest. "We love you, Moony."

Remus sighed before returning the hug. "Thanks, Longtooth."

Joining his Family, Harry told the older man, "Fong 'em Moony. We got you and you got us."

With a hint of a tear, Remus nodded in agreement. "What more do I need?"

Hermione held up a Never Ending Teapot charmed for Oolong Tea, Steven's favourite. Harry flipped her his money pouch as he and Moony moved outside. Quietly, they leaned on the wall of the shop, watching the sparse shoppers go about their business. A few of the more observant persons did a double take when they recognized Harry, but fortunately, those people also had manners and didn't flock to him.

"How do you do it, Remus?"

Knowing exactly what his pseudo nephew was talking about, Moony shrugged. "It's been happening all my life. I suppose I'm used to it by now."

His green eyes narrow, Harry countered, "Doesn't make it any easier, I expect."

Softly, Remus agreed, "No. It doesn't."

Turning to the werewolf, Harry felt his admiration for the man ratchet up a few more notches. Remus wasn't perfect by any means, but he was still the most decent, human and caring person Harry ever had or would know.

"You're a..." Harry's praise was cut off by an explosion.

Turning and crouching at the same time, Harry and Remus searched for the source of the detonation. Two blocks up the Alley, a cloud of dust obscured everything. Eyes narrowing, Harry searched for dark robed targets.

"Where are they?" Hermione asked from behind her husband. She'd just exited the shop when the Blasting curse blew up the front of what turned out to be The Pear Tree teashop. It was no coincidence that it was a muggleborn owned and operated business.

Hermione had already shrunk and stowed their present for Steven. Drawing her wand, she stood next to Harry who was flanked on the other side by Moony.

"We should leave," Remus advised.

Incredulous, Harry turned to his friend. "Harry, you're thirteen," Remus subtly reminded The Boy-Who-Lived about underage magic laws.

"And people are dying up there. I can't stand back when it's in my face, Moony."

Hermione plucked at his sleeve. Turning back to her, he found himself branded by her kiss. After a short moment, she pulled back, "Let's go," she told him.

Harry turned back to Remus who acquiesced with a shake of his head. Together they made their way up the Alley, wands drawn.

The dust and debris made target identification difficult. With their faces a smooth mask of determination, Harry took point heading into the murk, Hermione on his shoulder. Remus was rear guard, turning about every few steps to ensure no one was sneaking up behind them.

A shape loomed in the dust directly in front of Harry. Instead of calling out, Harry trained his wand on the figure, waiting for his or her action to identify them.

"Help," the figure coughed.

To be safe, Harry incanted, "Stupefy." As the figure slumped to the cobbles, Hermione rushed forward to find an old man with a nasty head wound.

A quick healing spell followed by touching the man's zip pull while muttering, "Portus," was the most she could do for the man. After the wizard portkeyed to St Mungo's, she rejoined the male members of the fire team. Under her breath, she muttered, "Let's go."

Two more Blasting curses flattened another building ahead of them, sending more dust and debris into the air. "Fuck this," Harry snarled. "Hominem Revelo!" he incanted followed by, "Go!".

Hermione was ready. As each person was illuminated by the spell, she and Harry rapid fire cast the Stunning spell. This neutralized over a dozen people in front of them in ten seconds or so. Their actions were observed, though.

A spell screamed by Harry's cheek from behind. Instinct caused him to throw himself to the ground as he felt the curse coming. Remus wheeled ninety degrees as he cast a spread of Reductor curses at knee level. He'd recognized the Entrail Expelling curse that almost eviscerated Harry. The gloves were off and he was bringing the hammer. A scream heralded the success of his efforts. Aiming at the cries of pain, he cast three Paralysis curses. The third cut off the moans and screams.

From his knees, Harry unleashed a spell that he privately called the 'Chain Gun'. It was a curse that Hermione had created to deal with large numbers of opponents. With a deft swipe of his wand from left to right, he cast fifty Piercing charms. Now the screams were coming fast and furious.

Overhead, the glittering green of the Dark Mark leered down on the heroes.

Hermione was incanting an old spell to create a strong wind which would blow away the obscuring cloud of dust and debris. Jabbing her wand to the North, she finished, "Zephyr!"

Like the Greek god of the wind, the resulting blast scoured the Alley clean of the dust, which had been obscuring their vision. Remus joined his young friends to see eight Death Eaters and two unlucky shoppers on the ground in front of them, bleeding from a series of holes across their torsos. Harry saw that four of the fools were dead while he, Hermione and Remus moved to stabilize the innocent bystanders.

Turning back, they found another Death Eater immobilized on the cobbles, his legs shattered below the knee. He was dead, most of his lifeblood pooled on the street.

"We need to get out of here, now," Remus insisted.

"Who is doing this? Who is coordinating these attacks?" Hermione whispered aloud.

Shaking his head in confusion, Harry twisted as he Apparated home. Hermione and Remus were a short second behind him.

.oOo.

DEATH EATERS ATTACK DIAGON ALLEY screamed the headline of the Daily Prophet the next day. As usual, Sirius summarized for the other residents.

"They captured four, five were killed by the 'unnamed heroic defenders of the Alley' and they believe three others were able to escape." Scanning the article, he hummed aloud until he resumed, "Names of the captured...names of the killed....here we go. Captured were a Jugson, Antonin Dolohov's little sister, and I don't recognize the other two. Killed were a bunch of people with French names, I don't recognize any of them."

"French?" Hermione asked. Sirius nodded before drinking his coffee.

Her bottom lip halfway in her mouth, Hermione was deep in thought when Harry asked, "How do they figure three others?"

"Spell residue. Of the seventeen shoppers killed, there were three killed by someone not accounted for by the captured or killed Death Eaters."

Harry shook his head; the death toll of the innocent was beginning to mount already.

Remus and Hermione were whispering off to the side when Steven asked the question that was bothering Moony and Longtooth, "Why the French?"

"Snape, maybe?" Alice postulated.

Harry and Sirius furrowed their brows as Alice explained, "He was seen in Bavaria near the new year, right? So maybe he's recruiting other pureblood supremacists to come here and support the Death Eater cause."

"They have enough to do in their own countries, though. So why are they coming here?" Sirius asked the room.

Remus and Hermione must have come to a resolution and an unpleasant one at that. She looked at the table with dread while

Remus scrubbed his face. After a long moment, Moony replied to Sirius' unanswered question.

"Maybe Snape's offered them an incentive," a pale faced Remus offered.

"Like what?" Sirius rejoined.

"Voldemort's return," Hermione whispered.

.oOo.

Duelling practice picked up at Rowan Hill. Remus warded one of the larger lumber rooms to be an indoor training room. A few Space Expansion charms and a host of runes to protect the surfaces of the room resulted in a room that covered an even acre of space in which they could train.

Steven and Alice attended the first sparring session. Sirius, Remus and Tonks were to melee against Harry and Hermione. Alice had protested the teaming until Sirius chuckled. "We'll see how long we can last against them. I'm hoping for two minutes."

The puzzled Grangers stepped behind the glowing Spectator Barrier and settled down to watch the show.

The older warriors missed the mark as they only lasted one hundred and seven seconds until they were incapacitated. Harry had a bruised shoulder from Dora's Bludgeoning hex but Hermione was unmarked.

Stunned by the display of combat prowess by the two teens, Alice asked, "How...?"

Harry shrugged as Hermione lied, "We've done a bit of practicing at school. With all the adventures that seem to pop up, we decided to practice a bit."

Alice absently nodded her acceptance while Steven watched his daughter, his frown deepening. He said nothing for a long moment before turning away.

Harry looked to Hermione and found her expression to be troubled. Watching the retreating back of the eldest Granger, Harry couldn't help but wonder if they'd just given themselves away.

"Come on, Midnight. Round two." Turning to Sirius, Harry nodded and drew his wand.

.oOo.

Hermione was reading the latest letter from Luna over tea. One of the biggest regrets Hermione had regarding their early leaving of full-time education was being separated from her friend. In her initial letter to the blonde girl, Hermione had expressed extreme regret for leaving her friend behind.

Luna's reply had sent Hermione into a fit of giggles. The blonde Ravenclaw had decided that Neville would be a suitable boyfriend, so he would have to pick up the free time that Hermione had opened by leaving.

Harry's letter wasn't nearly so light hearted. With a frown, he handed it to his wife.

"What's Minerva have to say?" she asked lightly.

"We may have a problem with the Twins," Harry replied seriously.

The Smartest Witch of the Age frowned as she settled into the missive. By the end, her brow was furrowed and she was chewing her lip. Apparently, there had been a rash of violent incidents that all 'happened' to revolve around children of prominent pureblood bigots. Most were also suspected to have been Death Eaters. Minerva had pulled Fred and George into her office, but the Twins had successfully stonewalled her, admitting nothing.

Turning to Harry, she told him, "Write to Fred and George, have them meet us in the Honeydukes' tunnel tomorrow night. We've got to nip this in the bud."

.oOo.

"What's up with your Dad?" Harry asked. Steven had been quiet the past few days. Since the sparring session, he'd been very reserved

and introspective. When around his daughter and her 'boyfriend', he'd watched them like a hawk.

"I don't know," she replied as they made their way up the tunnel toward school. "He's only quiet like this when he's upset or ill. I asked Mum and he's neither." With a quick flick of her wrist, Hermione created a floating orb of light which illuminated their section of tunnel.

They settled down to wait for the Twins as they pondered Steven Granger. Harry had become quite attached to his father in law. The man was more 'father-like' than Sirius and more emotionally available than Remus. There was a vague feeling of disapprobation from the man when he was around the teens lately and it disturbed Harry. He didn't want to come between Hermione and her parents, but in the end would never step aside. Full well did Harry know what his life would become without his bushy haired witch and he would never go back to where he'd been for that desolate year in Cornwall years from now.

As his musings ran their course, he heard the humpbacked witch grind open. Nudging Hermione, he stood and helped her to her feet. Moments later, the ginger haired Twins were revealed by Hermione's light. "Hey fellas," Harry greeted

Nods from the Twins were accompanied by forced smiles and jocularly. After the third joke about Harry and Hermione having sex, the couple exchanged a glance.

"Enough." Harry declared.

Fred and George frowned while crossing their arms. "I'll get to the point," Harry began. "Are you two hunting the purebloods?"

"McGonagall wrote you, did she?" Fred asked while scowling.

"Doesn't matter, but yes, she did," Hermione replied.

Snorting in derision, George countered, "If we are, it would be a bit hypocritical of you two to get on our tits about it, don't you think?"

"It's entirely different," Hermione answered.

"Really?" Fred scowled. "I'm sure it is."

Harry rolled his eyes, "Look, we're on the same side, so ease up, eh? It's just not right to be hurting and possibly killing these kids."

"Like the Malfoys?" George asked as he sneered.

"They earned their little spot in hell," Hermione answered. "Which is the whole point, but don't try to get us off topic. You don't know that these kids are guilty. You're lashing out because of what happened."

"Yeah, they killed our bloody parents, Granger! They fucking killed Mum and Dad! We've a right to hit back!" George was panting in his emotion. Fred placed a calming hand on his shoulder.

"I understand, I really do," Harry told the Twins. "Of anyone we know, I understand. But if you start hurting or even killing random people, you become just like the Death Eaters. You become the thing, which killed Arthur and Molly. Do you think your Mum would be proud of what you've done?"

This caused both boys to collapse in on themselves. Fred slid down the wall he was leaning on while George stared into the dark of the tunnel. They knew Molly would be horrified at their actions. Randomly attacking Slytherins who were pureblooded wouldn't be high on the hit parade of Arthur and Molly Weasley.

"We can't just sit back and do nothing," Fred whispered as he held his head in his hands.

"I'm not suggesting you do nothing." Harry paused for a second, contemplating. Finally, he asked, "How's your Occlumency?"

George shrugged, "Not sure. We practise most every day for an hour or so, but we've no one to test us."

Drawing his wand, Harry pointed it at Fred as he incanted, "Legilimens."

Harry reached out to test his ginger haired friend's shields. Slowly, he slithered about, looking for openings, fissures to exploit. Fred's shields felt like rough-hewn wood, serviceable but not sophisticated. Finding no entry points, he reared back and assaulted with brute

force. Imagining a diamond hard spike of energy, Harry drove forward against his friend's mental shields.

Once, twice and yet a third time, he attempted to breach Fred's Occlumatic shields. On the third run, Harry felt the shields begin to weaken, but they were good enough. He doubted anyone short of Snape or Voldemort would tie down the lads in order to lay a mental siege in order to breach Fred's defences.

Ending the spell, Harry's vision came into focus. Fred was pale and sweaty, but his expression was firm. Harry gave him a satisfied nod before turning his attention to George where he found similar results.

Turning to Hermione, he told her, "They're good enough."

Nodding, she flicked her wand, creating two comfortable sofas. A few Warming Charms made the tunnel a bit more liveable. "Get comfortable lads, we've quite a story to tell you."

.oOo.

"Dear Lord."

"That has been most people's reaction," Hermione observed.

Fred sat there silently as George muttered to himself. "How did we die?" George eventually asked.

"I don't know. I never asked your Dad and no one offered to tell us."

Fred finally levelled his gaze on The Boy-Who-Lived and asked, "What do we need to do to prevent all that from happening?"

Harry deferred to his better half when she told the Twins, "Right now, we need you to be our eyes and ears in the Castle. Voldemort has this unhealthy obsession with this school..."

"Although, that could be because I've been here," Harry interjected with a smile.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione got back on track, "So we need you guys to keep an eye out for stuff that's really out of the ordinary."

"Watch the pureblood bigots' kids. You know the ones we're talking about and not just the ones in Slytherin."

"But don't attack them," Hermione scowled.

Fred regarded the Potters with a considering expression. "Why not?"

"We've been through this..." Hermione complained.

"But you two could tell us who the legitimate targets are," Fred objected.

"Do you really think Dumbledore wouldn't act if his students started dying on his watch?" Harry asked softly.

"He didn't do dick last year with the Basilisk and all!"

George placed a calming hand on his twin's arm. Fred subsided a bit before muttering, "Mum and Dad," to himself. Reminding himself of his moral compass seemed to reorient the fifth year student. "Fine. But we're not playing rounders anymore. This is full on Quidditch with real bludgers. I'm not going to cast Stunners when the bastards are casting Unforgivables."

Harry nodded, "Fair enough. But don't go hunting without talking to us first. Deal?"

George nodded, "Deal."

"Watch over Neville and Luna for us, will you boys?" Hermione asked.

"Sure, sure," Fred agreed as he dusted off his robes before they headed back to the school.

Once they heard the humpbacked witch entry grind shut, Hermione asked her husband, "Do you think they'll keep on with the attacks?"

"I hope not," Harry replied. "Dumbledore has to be furious already. If it keeps on, he'll twig them eventually."

"And then he'll be on to us."

.oOo.

"Hey you two," Sirius greeted them when they returned to Rowan Hill. "I need to talk to you."

When Sirius shut the door of the Lord's study, he turned to the Potters, his expression downcast.

"What's up?" Harry asked.

"The Child Protective Service people were more understanding of our situation given the article in the Prophet, but they still want to talk to you," he jerked his chin at Harry.

"About what?"

"Me. They point blank told me that they have concerns regarding my mental stability in the aftermath of so many years around the Dementors."

Harry waved off his godfather's fears, "That's easy. I'll tell them that you're a model of mental health. You make me talk about everything, don't let me drink alcohol, make me go to church and forbid me from dating. Oh, you also make me eat my vegetables."

Sirius was grinning at the end of Harry's litany. Ruffling Midnight's hair, he muttered, "Putz."

"Joking aside, if they are going to hinge any decision on my input, we're in the clear," Harry concluded.

"Maybe," Hermione corrected.

"What's with your 'maybe' there Longtooth?" Sirius scowled.

"Honestly," she huffed. "This is Albus Dumbledore we're talking about. He won't give up easily and he's not without supporters. We underestimate him at our peril."

"Great," Harry whinged. "I've got a certified Dark Lord to kill all the while keeping the 'Light Lord' at arm's distance. Joy."

"Shaddup," Sirius scolded as he chucked a book at his godson.

Wrapping her arm about Harry's, she looked lovingly at the two men while reassuring them, "It'll be alright. We've got each other and in the end, that's all that matters. Right?"

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to all who reviewed the first eight chapters. Story status, as always, can be found on my Author's page on FanFiction(dot)net.

2. Recommendation for the chapter is not a fanfic, but rather a book: *Starship Troopers* by Robert Heinlein. It's a phenomenally thought provoking book written in the Fifties that is just as relevant today as it was then. Discussions about authority, responsibility to self and society, the true nature of courage and loyalty all blend in under the guise of a science fiction classic. Along with Isaac Asimov, Heinlein legitimized the entire genre. Take the time to learn about the courage of the troopers of the *Rodger Young*, the integrity of LtCol (ret) Jean Dubois and the humanity of Johnnie Rico. Fantastic story.

3. If you haven't figured it out, the whole 'The Cupboard Under The Stairs' address on Harry's first letter enrages me. When I tucked my kids into bed tonight, the thought crossed my mind that somewhere near our home, some parent was literally or figuratively putting their kid into 'The Cupboard Under The Stairs'. As I kissed our son and daughters good night, I had to shake my head at the monstrosity of it all. Folks, it's not funny for Harry to have lived in a closet and be treated by his relatives the way he was. It's called abuse and people go to prison for it.

4. I had a fleeting thought to end the chapter with Alice asking about Hermione's love life, but thought, "That's wrong. Funny, but wrong."

Chapter 10

"Holy fonging fong."

Hermione rolled her eyes and almost told Harry to go ahead and curse normally. Almost.

They had been roaming over the grounds of Rowan Hill while in their animagus forms. It was freeing for the couple to run, leap and sprint through the woods as Longtooth and Midnight. The hardwood forest that ringed Snowden provided ample scenes of beauty for them to marvel. They'd just stumbled upon one.

It was a dell that opened to the west and the sea. At the base, there was a small spring, which fed a clear pool, which in turn bubbled over into a brook of the cleanest water. The small snow white flowers that ringed the area scented the air with an aroma that for a moment, made the time travelling teens think it was springtime and not the end of January. The hot spring kept the entire dell warm, creating an artificial springtime. The thick spongy moss was a carpet of green upon which Harry had just settled.

Hermione shifted form before she curled up behind Harry, pulling him into her embrace. Despite the hot spring, the air had a bit of bite in it. Harry leaned back into her embrace and sighed. It had been a hard few weeks since they'd decided to 'forgo full time education' as Fred and George had once said.

The interview with the Child Protective Services agent had been uncomfortable. Abiding his self-imposed rule that only family was allowed inside the wards of Rowan Hill, Harry and Sirius had used the Floo to travel to the Ministry offices.

Despite being magical, the Ministry was a bureaucracy which meant that there were endless offices and a labyrinthine passageway system that made Gringotts seem like an open field. Becoming frustrated, Sirius wrote a quick note to Eric McDonnell, the agent assigned to their case, before casting the Find Me charm on the note. Watching the paper fold itself, Harry wondered why there weren't any maps of the facility. Using the magical paper airplane like Ariadne's string, they followed it for ten minutes until it landed on a non-descript desk in a warren of cubicles.

A youngish man was buried under a mountain of parchment while he grumbled to himself. Clearing his throat, Sirius announced their presence.

"Ah, my Lord Black and Mr Potter," the man jovially greeted the duo. Glancing at his pocket watch, McDonnell mused, "Right on time. Capital." Gesturing with his hand, he beckoned them, "We'll just adjourn to a conference room for some privacy." He tucked a thick stack of files and parchment under his arm before leading the way.

When Harry closed the door behind him, McDonnell absently cast a series of Privacy charms. "Just give me a minute..." McDonnell asked as he arranged the forms and reports on the table provided. Satisfied, he smiled at the duo.

"Gentlemen, with the disclosures that have been run in the newspaper, I think we all are aware of the motive behind the opening of this investigation. However," he looked apologetically to Sirius, "There is still sufficient cause for CPS to look into the situation."

Harry's eyes narrowed a bit when McDonnell bluntly continued, "Twelve years of exposure to Dementors is enough to drive anyone mad, my Lord. I've read through the reports of the three Mind Healers that you had interviews with and to be frank, I'm astounded."

Lifting one report, he read aloud, "Despite a lingering adolescent immaturity, there appears to be no permanent damage to the subject by his exposure to Dementors. There are occasional episodes that the subject can escape without outside intervention. These episodes are severe in occurrence, but infrequent. Nevertheless, the occurrence indicates the need for therapy, but on the whole, the subject is fit for guardianship."

Looking Sirius in the eye, McDonnell gushed, "How did you manage to stave off the effects, sir?"

"Healthy living," Sirius quipped.

Rolling his eyes, Harry nudged his godfather. "Fine," he grumbled, "I'm an animagus. When the Dementors were near, I shifted form. That and the fact that I was innocent helped me stay sane."

McDonnell was scribbling notes furiously. After he finished, he told the dark haired wizards across from him, "As far as your guardianship Mr Potter, the will of your parents can't be found. We've been checking and Gringotts is in an uproar. Now that you've assumed control of your inheritance, I'd ask you to check your family vaults to see if there's a copy there for safekeeping."

Sirius frowned, "Did you check with Maturin, Tonks and Aubrey? They were James' solicitors."

"We did. Apparently the file for James and Lily Potter did not contain the will in question. The investigating Auror personally checked after the paralegal reported the file empty. As such," he indicated an unspoken apology with his hands, "There is no legal designated succession for guardianship of Mr Potter. Personally, I believe you, my Lord, when you tell me that you're Mr Potter's godfather, but that isn't a legal document. Since the only blood relatives are muggles..."

"What are you talking about? Harry is my second cousin," Sirius interjected.

This took McDonnell by surprise. Flipping through the file, he eventually regarded Sirius with confusion.

"Harry's grandmother was Dorea Potter, née Black. Dorea Black was my father's older sister."

"Oh." McDonnell replied lamely.

"And the muggle relatives you referred to earlier have abdicated all guardianship responsibilities to me using all the correct muggle forms. I also have the magical forms as well." He passed over a packet of papers that he'd picked up from the solicitors the day before. "These are notarized copies, feel free to keep them."

"This complicates matters," McDonnell muttered.

Speaking for the first time, Harry asked, "Why is that?"

"Well, you see. As far as I knew, this was a simple case of a minor with no designated guardian. The process is simple. Interested persons may apply for guardianship, there is a hearing where the

parties press their claim, the minor in question can voice their preference and then a judge decides. This," he waved at the papers Sirius provided, "Complicate matters in that everything points to my Lord Black assuming your guardianship, but we are lacking a judge's order. Also, we have one other person who has already applied for guardianship of you."

Tapping his chin for a moment, McDonnell thought. Finally, he stood, "I'm going to check on a few things, I should be back in a half hour. Would you like to stay here or return at a later date?"

"We'd like to wrap this up if at all possible. We'll wait," Sirius told the man.

When they were alone, Harry scowled. "No will. No listing of our familial relation. No record of the Dursley's telling me to fuck off. Some mystery person wanting to be my guardian. What the fuck Padfoot?"

His eyes closed, Sirius rubbed the bridge of his nose, "I sure as hell hope that the other person isn't Dumbledore." Opening his eyes, he gave his godson a significant look "We may have to go for broke if he is." Grimacing, Harry nodded his understanding.

After ten minutes of waiting, Harry conjured a pack of cards and a cribbage board. Sirius took to the game with a will and they'd just finished their third game by the time McDonnell returned, an older man in tow.

"My Lord, Mr Potter, this is Wilfred Ehlinger, he's the juvenile court judge who usually rules on custody and guardianship cases."

When the greetings and handshakes had run their course, the four men sat while McDonnell explained, "I've explained to his lordship the twists and turns of the situation and he had graciously chosen to personally review the situation."

Harry smirked internally. Sometimes it paid off being The Boy-Who-Lived, godson of Sirius Black.

Ehlinger read through the papers Sirius had provided, grunting when he finished them. Harry interpreted it as a 'satisfied grunt' and not a

'why are you bothering me grunt'. Ten years of living with Vernon Dursley did pay off from time to time.

Finally, the older man leaned back in his chair while fixing Harry with a beady eyed gaze. "Lord Harry," the man began. "How did you come to be in the custody of Mr and Mrs V. Dursley of Surrey?" Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw McDonnell set up a Transcription Quill and parchment.

"I'm told that Headmaster Dumbledore arranged for my placement on their doorstep on midnight the night after my parents were slaughtered, my lord. Deputy Headmistress McGonagall was present that night. Despite her strong objections to my placement there, the Headmaster overrode her and left me there. She told me that he left my relatives a note to explain my appearance."

Stunned, Ehlinger repeated, "On the step with a note?"

"Yes, my Lord."

Bewildered at the lunacy of Dumbledore's actions, Ehlinger continued while McDonnell took notes. "Moses in the bulrushes...Would you prefer to live with your Aunt and Uncle or with my Lord Black?"

Harry outright laughed. "My Lord, I mean no disrespect, but my relatives tried to beat the magic out of me on more than one occasion. My back is covered with scars from the 'loving attentions' of my Aunt and Uncle. On the other hand, my Lord Black has been most welcoming, accommodating and, dare I even say. loving in his bringing me into his household. I would much rather prefer to live with my Lord Black."

McDonnell and Ehlinger gaped at Harry. "Dumbledore placed you with these animals?" Harry mutely nodded. "Did he ever check up on you?"

"I'm unaware if he did. I've just found out that he commissioned a squib to live in the area to watch over me. She lived two blocks away."

Not looking up from the Transcription Quill, McDonnell snorted at the ridiculousness of Mrs Figg's location compared with her mission as a minder.

Ehlinger grumbled before announcing, "We can end this farce right now, but there will be a price. I can sign all the paperwork awarding my Lord Black custody and guardianship of you, Lord Harry, but you will have to make a fairly explicit statement regarding your treatment while you resided with your relatives and Albus Dumbledore's involvement therein. This statement will be part of the public record. I tell no secrets when I inform you that he has already applied for guardianship of you also, but it will be a cold day in hell when I let him have custody of you."

Grimacing, Harry asked, "How explicit?"

Understanding Harry's reticence, Ehlinger replied, "Enough, Lord Harry that anyone who reads the report will know exactly what happened for the instances you describe."

Scrubbing his face, Harry swore under his breath. Sirius placed a steadying hand on his godson's shoulder. Resignedly, Harry nodded. "Where do I start?"

.oOo.

"Longtooth, Midnight needs you. He's in his room." Remus and the Grangers watched Hermione hustle out of the drawing room before turning to Sirius for an explanation. The dark haired wizard slowly meandered to the wet bar where he poured himself a generous tumbler of whisky.

In a low, dangerous voice, Sirius asked, "Did you know that Vernon Dursley tied Harry to the bannister before flogging him with an authentic cat o' nine tails? Harry was five. Petunia threw him down the stairs, breaking his leg. He was seven. Dudley beat Harry under his parents supervision so many times that Harry lost count...the neighbourhood kids under Dudley's coercion...Dursley's sister and her fucking dogs."

By the end of Sirius' recitation, tears were coursing down Padfoot's face. A lone tear escaped the staggered expression of Remus Lupin

while Alice Granger covered her mouth, tears springing from her eyes. Steven stared at the wall, his expression set and grim.

"If he didn't need me, I'd torture them to death. Azkaban be damned."

.oOo.

The next few days, the household opened the paper with bated breath. Since Harry's statements were considered public record, any interested party could read the transcripts. The day after Sirius was awarded custody, the required two line announcement was published in the paper under the classified section.

Awarded Custody: Earl of Blackmoor, S. Black, of the minor Earl of Richmond, H. Potter.

With a snort, Harry had commented, "So that's what Lady Augusta was on about. I'll be an Earl upon my majority."

"When you pass your OWLs," Sirius corrected as he finished off an enormous bowl of porridge that was leavened with diced peaches.

"Whatever," Harry muttered as he tossed the paper on the table. Scrubbing his face, he turned to Hermione. "Any day, some Rita Skeeter wannabe is going to find that statement and then all hell will break loose."

Hermione rubbed his arm in commiseration but said nothing. Not much could be said.

.oOo.

Reductor. Cutting. Bone Exploding. Decapitation. Blood Boiling. Blinding.

Curse after curse Harry cast at the training dummies that Remus had created for their duelling room. After ten spells the first dummy burst into flames; the energy sumps had overflowed its container's construct.

He didn't miss a beat. Turning to the opposite corner, Harry continued his barrage on the next dummy.

Siege Engine. Chain Lightning. Detonation. Earth Shaker.

Still his rage mounted. Still his shame consumed him

Sweat poured off him in rivulets, darkening his shirt, slicking his hands and arms. Silently he destroyed target after target without pause, without remorse. Sometimes the target wore Vernon Dursley's face; sometimes it wore Lord Voldemort's face. Occasionally, it wore the long bearded visage of Albus Dumbledore.

At the doorway, Hermione Potter watched her husband attempt to vent his pain by pouring it out of him in violence and death. She knew him too well; she knew it wouldn't work. When he paused to catch his breath, she hurried to him. Not bothering with trivialities like speech, she wrapped him in her embrace, pulling him into her.

For the first time since he was five years old, Harry Potter wept for his savaged childhood. Hermione wept with him and for him. Tucking her face into his sodden hair, she whispered nothings to him, trying and failing to reassure him that she was there and all would be well in the end.

"I love you, Harry. I love you," she repeated in a mantra.

In the shadows of the door, Steven Granger watched.

.oOo.

It was two days later when the story broke. The headlines shrieked Harry's private humiliation while Dobby reported owls by the dozen bringing letters of condolence. It was at lunch that Fawkes appeared.

Harry closed his eyes as the phoenix mournfully trilled his greeting to The Boy-Who-Lived. Silently, Harry took the rolled parchment from Fawkes' extended leg before he opened the note. Without pause he read it, dropped the note on the table and walked out of the room.

With a hint of trepidation, Hermione plucked the letter from the table top before reading aloud.

Dear Harry,

I was chagrined to read the paper this morning. Even more so was I shamed for my role in your suffering. No words can make right what I've done. No apology or even grovelling can wipe the past for you. I wish there was something that I could do to right this wrong. It shall be my largest regret when I die that I've been instrumental in your agony. If there is anything that I can do by action or omission to assist you, please tell me.

I am sorry, Harry. More sorry than I can express.

Your obedient servant,

A. Dumbledore

"You know, I think he's sincere," Hermione observed softly.

"He's sorry?" hissed Sirius. "He's fucking sorry?" Throwing his hands in the air with sarcastic relief, Sirius howled, "Well thank the maker! Albus is sorry! It's because of him that this is an issue at all!" he scowled the last.

Sirius had a bit of a complex about Harry's upbringing. He knew that if he'd had a cooler head about him that fateful day, he wouldn't have been sent to Azkaban and therefore raised his godson as he ought. At the same time, he also knew that he was only human. Alice Granger had told him that it was completely understandable that he'd lost his head and Sirius knew she was right. Harry agreed with her. Yet...

Standing, Sirius spun on his heel, leaving the family dining room at a near trot.

Alice rubbed Hermione's arm as the young woman wondered what she could do for her husband. "Just love him, dear," Alice advised. "You can't do any more than that. Love him the best you can."

Peeved a bit at her mother's unconscious condescension, Hermione nodded before leaving to find her man.

.oOo.

"I gotta do something to take my mind off this shit," Harry grumbled to his wife. Even surrounded by his family, Harry had never felt as alone as he felt this morning. Unbidden, flashes of his life in Surrey intruded on his consciousness. A very large part of him wanted to Apparate to Privet Drive to wreak havoc, taking his vengeance in blood and pain.

The saner, calmer part of him realized that violence against his relatives at this point would merely allow him to sink to their level. Just as his Aunt and Uncle abused a young boy who was helpless against them, he could abuse them who were helpless against him and his magic.

Hermione was lying in his arms as they were ensconced in an ancient oak tree. She had found him rather easily. Becoming Longtooth, she found that Harry's scent was a track a mile wide. Eventually, she found his trail climbing a tree which overlooked a small lake deep in the forests of the estate. After scaling the tree, a few Warming charms were the ticket to an enjoyable afternoon in Wales during January.

From his chest, she smiled before offering, "We could shag until you pass out."

Snorting his laughter, Harry kissed the crown of her head. "Maybe tomorrow. Thanks, though."

Remembering what Sirius had once told him, he wormed out from under her. "Let's run," he challenged her. Transforming into Midnight, the black jaguar sprinted down the tree branches as if he were on the ground. Seconds later, a lioness was in pursuit, soft growls accompanying her exertions.

Thus they started their practice of running over the estate of Rowan Hill for a few hours every day. Usually in the morning they spent time with Remus working on Runes at the NEWT level and beyond. In the afternoons, they ran.

It was good exercise as well as a way to work out demons. Sirius had told Harry that his emotions were simpler as Padfoot and that helped him stay sane while in Azkaban. As Midnight, Harry's emotions were simpler as well. This uncomplicatedness helped him sort the emotional wheat from the chaff.

He sorted through his anger at Sirius for abandoning him to the Dursleys while in pursuit of vengeance against Peter.

He dealt with his anger at Remus for not finding him during his childhood.

It took him a while to come to a point where he could even contemplate Albus Dumbledore and maintain a semblance of equilibrium, but eventually he found a semblance of composure when the old man occupied his thoughts. It would be many long years before he could forgive the Headmaster, though.

He even addressed lingering anger at his parents for dying and leaving him alone to be hurt so badly.

Weeks went by as he and Hermione ran, explored, hunted and purged the poison as best they could. There was also a lot of sex, not all of it the most pure of heart. Both of them knew that they needed each other in this physical, carnal way. They were there for each other.

After finding the hot spring, they made it their outdoor hot tub. Hours were spent soaking in the warm water. Hours that he talked and she listened. Hours where she talked and he listened.

Dobby cooked Treacle Tarts, one after the other.

Sirius and Remus duelled with the couple.

Dora joked and laughed with them.

Steven and Alice were quietly supportive.

Minerva dropped by as often as she could.

The Twins sent letters describing their new reign of terror now that they were certified Occlumens.

Neville and Luna sent letters describing the day to day humdrum of Hogwarts.

Life went on.

.oOo.

There had been no Death Eater attacks since the setback in Diagon Alley to Voldemort's leaderless forces. There was much speculation in the papers wondering if the resurgent forces of the Dark Lord had been dealt a fatal blow. Harry, Remus, Hermione and Sirius had discussed it for a bit before reluctantly coming to a resolution.

The snake was coiling. It was merely a matter of time until another rampage was unleashed upon Britain. "They may be waiting for their master," Remus offered.

Shaking his head, Sirius declared, "I'm going batshit. Let's get out of here."

.oOo.

"Mum, Dad, would you like to go on an outing with us?" Hermione asked.

Closing her book, Alice looked up at her daughter. "Where to, dear?"

Sitting across from her mother, Hermione looked to her Dad. Steven was at his typewriter, a pencil in his mouth and his hair sticking up in all directions from running his hands through his hair. "Harlech Castle looks interesting. It's a certified world heritage site and is one of the best preserved non magical castles in Britain."

Steven frowned. Without looking up, he asked, "Is it safe?"

Sirius answered, "It should be. It's not a magical site, so I doubt any Death Eaters or the like will be there and as far as anyone else is concerned, we're a family on a day trip."

Smiling, Alice stood, "Let's go, then. It'll be good to get out."

The wind was brisk, but the sun was uncharacteristically out and sunny. A few Warming charms applied to gloves and shoes went a long way to keeping the Family comfortable. The castle was right on the coast to the southeast of Rowan Hill. Its beautiful vista also exposed the visitors to the strong winds roiling in from the north Atlantic.

Sirius was a kid in a candy store. He dogged Harry and Hermione up the northern turret to the top before he hounded Remus and Tonks into the dungeons. Alice and Steven meandered through the remarkably preserved castle, hand in hand just enjoying being out from their adopted home.

Harry, once he escaped his godfather, took Hermione to the tallest battlement where they cuddled and enjoyed being alive. When the castle was built by Edward I, Harlech Castle was on the seashore. In the intervening seven hundred years, silt deposits had pushed the beach a good half mile away. The scene was exactly the same as the one at home, though. Since they weren't at home, though, being out gave the visitors a freshening in their outlooks on life. Where the walls were beginning to press in on them the day before, today life was pretty good.

.oOo.

"We need to do that more often," Alice announced while the group hung up their coats. They found a small inn where they got dinner and a local beer. Steven had nodded, allowing Hermione to have her 'first' bitter. Sirius hadn't thought twice as he ordered one for Harry and one for himself.

Tonks was snuggled up to Remus and enjoying the warm inn when she stiffened before sighing audibly. "Communication charm," she grumbled. "There's been another attack with the Dark Mark overhead."

Frowning, Remus asked, "Where?"

"Lancashire. Apparently Voldemort's fanboys attacked a muggle farm," Dora grumbled as she gathered her hat and coat. After giving Moony a quick, but thorough kiss, she waved to the rest of the family before heading out the door.

The mood dampened considerably, the remaining family silently ate their meal. When they finished and were shrugging into their coats, Harry leaned into his wife, "We probably need to make some more visits."

Grim faced, Hermione nodded her agreement. Behind the agreeable visage of a fourteen year old girl, the soldier began to plan.

.oOo.

"Fong, it's cold."

"Shut it Midnight. Don't be such a girl."

"Fong you, Padfoot."

"Would you two stop it? Come on," Hermione beckoned to the rest of the group. Dora, Remus and Minerva approached the rope they were using as a portkey.

It was one AM and the family was kitted out in black. They were headed out to visit the home of Thorfin Rowle and his wife, Ygdra. When Harry saw a picture of Rowle, he shuddered in recognition. Now he had a name to the face of the first man he'd intentionally killed.

Once the six combatants were touching the rope, Hermione touched it with her wand, whispering the activation phrase, "Justice."

.oOo.

Only one word could accurately describe the Rowle home: compound. The walls were twelve feet tall and topped with poisoned razor wire. Guard dogs patrolled the lawn while Midnight could hear something large in the woods away to the north.

"I think it's a troll," Remus whispered.

Minerva changed back to her human form. "Yes, it is." Scanning the landscape, she opined, "This won't be easy to enter."

Padfoot shifted to Sirius, who motioned to his godson and his wife to gather round. Once everyone was close and human, he cast a privacy charm. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way. The hard way is to slink around for a few days probing for weaknesses all the while freezing our manly and womanly bits off."

Hermione rolled her eyes before asking, "And the easy way?"

Sirius smiled while Harry chuckled. "Easy, my love." Harry answered for Sirius. "Entry via Reductor curse, followed by lots of running, hexing and then a bottle of Ogden's finest."

Dora shrugged, "I'm game."

Minerva looked up and around. Pointing to a tall oak, she told the group, "I'll get high in the tree to provide overwatch."

Harry nodded before telling his former head of house, "Use your portkey when you see the flames."

Looking each in the eye, she wished them, "Godspeed my friends."

"And to you as well, Minerva," Sirius replied.

Once the tabby cat had settled high in the tree, Sirius turned to his godson, "Will you do the honours my good man?"

"I'd be delighted, sir."

Hermione shook her head while muttering something that sounded similar to, "Morons."

Once the five person assault team was ready, Remus flashed his open hand in Minerva's direction. Her feline night vision saw the streak of white that was the werewolf's palm, so she turned back to human form. With deliberate precision, she pointed her wand, breathed deeply before slowly letting it out. At the midpoint of her exhale, she incanted, "Percutio."

The invisible eldritch fire of the Piercing charm lanced out, drilling a hole in the head of the closest guard dog. Two more incantations resulted in two more dead dogs.

Shifting back to her tabby cat form, Minerva let loose a yowl, "Meroorow."

Harry's only reply was, "Coracis!"

The Siege Engine spell was a wonderful piece of magic. When Harry cast it, a twenty foot section of the wall surrounding the Rowle

home exploded inward. Before the debris all landed, Remus was through the opening, Sirius and Dora on his heels. Harry and Hermione were last through, scanning left and right as their elders dashed for the house.

Off to the left, they heard a scream. Turning they saw a man falling to the ground, one of his legs a twisted mass of bone, blood and gore. Minerva had used a Bone Exploding curse to great effect.

Surging forward, Remus cast a quick Reductor curse at the main doors. The entryway was reduced to splinters as he sprinted in the house and up the stairs. Dora was right behind him as Sirius and the Potters split off to clear the downstairs.

In the cinema it seems perfectly straightforward. The good guys run in the house, a few shots (or spells in this case) are fired, and then the good guys come out with a bloody shoulder or scalp. Everyone smiles at each other then goes off to have a beer or sex. Sometimes both.

The cinema skips the pulse pounding fear; the adrenalin fuelled heightened senses and the confusion. Harry heard shouts and spells from upstairs. Flashing through his mind was concern for Remus and Dora, concern for Hermione and Sirius all the while being as focused as humanly possible on the room in front of him.

Where are they? There? No. What was that? There!

There was movement to his front left. Before he could think, his wand was up and a silent Reductor curse sped toward the target. The unidentified man didn't even see his death coming, his torso exploded before he could focus on the inhabitants of the room.

Harry didn't stop. Pushing Sirius out of the way, he led the way down the hall to the study. There were screams upstairs now. A huge blond man stepped out of the study when Harry was fifteen feet away. The Boy-Who-Lived recognized the target instantly.

In a crazy déjà vu, Harry cast the Cutting curse which decapitated Thorfin Rowle.

Again.

The huge Death Eater slowly began to topple, his headless corpse fountaining blood over Harry.

Again.

Time slowed for The Boy-Who-Lived. He was mentally transported to the future that was and he remembered. He remembered why he was there that night and why he was here tonight. In a microsecond, Harry's reality crystalized for him. He was fighting for his love and his life. He was fighting for his Family and other families so that they might not suffer as he had suffered.

He didn't look back as Rowle's corpse thumped on the hardwood floors. A quick Cleaning spell cleared the blood from him as he headed toward the dining rooms where he could hear Sirius and Hermione exchanging spellfire with an opponent.

.oOo.

Remus had a broken arm. Rowle was either hosting a multi-day party or his home was a base camp for the rejuvenated Death Eaters. Either way, Moony and Tonks had ripped through the upstairs, he using the Reductor curse, she the Blasting spell.

"There has to be a dozen of them here!" Tonks had shouted as they fought their way through the half-awake Death Eaters as they stumbled out of bed.

He was 'tidying up' one last room when a hiding Death Eater had burst from a closet swinging a beater's bat. The bat had broken Remus' wand arm, dropping Moony to the floor.

The Death Eater was about to crush Remus' skull when Dora helped out her boyfriend. In a moment of hilarity, she Vanished the bat from the man's hands. Not realizing he was now unarmed, he swung down at Remus, nothing in his hands.

From behind him, Dora muttered, "Tsk, tsk, idiot." Her eyes narrowed when he dove toward her. Pushing hard with her magic, she incanted, "Obliviate!"

The Death Eater reeled away. Finally he slumped to the floor, drool starting to dribble from the side of his mouth.

Ignoring the now harmless Death Eater who might remember how to talk, Dora moved to Remus' side, "You alright, love?"

Groaning, he accepted her help to stand as he grabbed his wand. Muttering, "Ferula," he nodded when the magical splint finished forming. "That'll have to do for now. Come on, let's get out of here."

Meeting up with Harry, Hermione and Sirius at the foot of the steps, Remus was happy to see that the rest of his family appeared unhurt. Looking closer, he saw a long cut on Harry's arm and Sirius was limping.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," Sirius growled.

"Do the duty, would you love?" Harry asked his wife as he helped Sirius out the door.

Turning back to the interior of the house, Hermione raised her wand before incanting, "Fiendfyre."

In the shadows of the roaring flames, the Family portkeyed home. It was almost four AM when they were healed and able to crawl into bed. By then, Sirius' broken leg had been set and Skele-Gro forced down his throat. Harry's cut and Remus' arm had also been healed. Minerva left them all after a long look, as if she were trying to burn them into her consciousness, lest she forget them. Silently shaking her head, she headed to the entry hall fireplace to Floo back to the castle. Hesitating, she turned back to her 'children'.

"Goodnight all. Get some sleep. You did good work out there tonight."

.oOo.

Because of the family's raids, the Prophet coined a name for them: The Fiendfyre Vigilantes. The targets all being suspected or 'exonerated' Death Eaters wasn't missed by the editorial staff of the newspaper. Even the wireless began discussing the raids.

George Fisher was an extremely popular conservative talk show host who had a daily segment that played from half eleven to noon. Since the magical community didn't have telephones, the show was

essentially a half hour of Mr Fisher elucidating his beliefs. He tended to think of it as 'enlightening the masses'.

Nonetheless, George Fisher spent the entire show on the first Monday of February commending the Fiendfyre Vigilantes. "I'm not saying that what they're doing is right. They're outside of the law and that's not on. However, they are doing what needs to be done, what our government is too afraid to do."

The Daily Prophet for the first Tuesday of February showed a picture of the Dark Mark which had glittered over the gutted ruins of Fisher's home. Fisher himself hadn't been home, anticipating an attack or the like.

Tuesday's show was one for the books. Hellfire and brimstone would have been an accurate description of Fisher's rant. The man took an enormous breath as the clock chimed half eleven, began talking and went for a half hour.

"...disgusting behaviour. One would think these Death Eaters mental defectives..."

"...they act like children. 'If you won't follow my rules, I'll take my ball and go home' is a perfect description of these fools. Unfortunately, their prey isn't always so lucky as to have alternate residences, as I have."

"Why isn't the government doing something? I guarantee that if half-bloods or muggleborns were acting like the Death Eaters, the Minister and the Wizengamot would be screaming for blood!"

Harry chuckled at the last. Sirius had turned on the wireless to tune into Fisher's rant. The family had delayed lunch in order to hear Fisher's extolling of the virtues of the Fiendfyre Vigilantes while damning the vices of the government.

Midway through the show, Steven had mused, "This fellow has a decided opinion, yeah?"

Without looking up from his book, Remus replied, "Unfortunately, he's spot on."

.oOo.

"Harry, may I speak with you for a minute?"

Harry looked up from his book to see a stern faced Steven Granger accompanied by his nervous daughter. Sliding a bookmark in the very frank biography of Gellert Griddlewald, Harry indicated the chair opposite him. Hermione slid into the open space next to Harry on the divan while Steven settled in his chair.

"Dobby," Harry called softly.

When the house elf appeared, Harry asked, "Would you please bring tea and snacks?" Moments later the request was gleefully filled. Harry poured in silence while he wondered what had his wife so upset and her father so serious.

Steven's quietude and long looks had been increasing over the previous weeks until the man rarely spoke. Harry had given up trying to figure out the man, he had much bigger issues at hand. After the Rowle House raid, the Death Eaters had struck out in force. Unfortunately, they had been striking out at non magical targets. Over two dozen families had been slaughtered in the previous two weeks.

Steven took a long sip from his cup before glancing out the window. "You two don't know it, but the Army paid my way through dental school. In return, I served for four years before school. I was in the Parachute Regiment."

Harry closed his eyes in understanding. Steven's long silences, the contemplative expressions while watching Harry and Hermione duel with the rest of the Family, the aura of menace and his overall fitness was explained in those six words: 'I was in the Parachute Regiment'.

"During the last year of my term, I went aboard ship and we went to a little known archipelago in the southern Atlantic. Maybe you've heard of the Falkland Islands?"

Neither teen replied to the rhetorical question. Hermione's grip on her husband's hand tightened, though.

He continued to stare out the window to the sea as he digressed. "When you went off to that school Pumpkin, I was scared shitless. I wasn't able to protect you anymore and I didn't like it. I also was completely unaware as to what you were going to be exposed. I mean really, what the hell is Transfiguration?"

Hermione started to answer her father but subsided at his glare.

"You know what I mean. The school does a piss poor job of preparing the non-magical parents for their children's experiences. Anyway, we were less than pleased when the word of your petrification came to us in your second year. Fortunately for your continued enrolment at Hogwarts, Minerva brought the word herself and had the solution of that draught in her hip pocket. I tell you, I was a slick minute from hauling you out of that school. The only thing that stayed my hand was the fact that you were happy. You had friends and I couldn't take that away from you."

Nodding to Harry, he admitted, "You've done something for my little girl that I couldn't and I'm eternally indebted to you, Harry." Turning back to his daughter, he continued, "After last year, though, you really hadn't changed much. This year, though..." he trailed off as he looked out the window again.

"I've seen war and death. I've visited it upon my fellow man. I've also seen professional soldiers who've been trained to the razor's edge. You two are Bringers of Death, just as I was in my youth. That doesn't happen in a few off hours of practice as you claimed. It's a result of long hours of training and experience. There's something going on and I don't like lies. Secrets I understand, but we're family. Whatever you're hiding has crossed the line from a secret to outright lying and I don't like it."

Turning back to the couple, he demanded, "Tell me the truth. Now."

Harry gulped.

Hermione paled.

"S-Sir, it's a very strange story. Nearly unbelievable, but it's true. It's also a long one. We should probably get Mrs Granger so as to only tell the story once." Harry was severely annoyed with himself. He

hadn't stuttered like this since he admitted to Hermione that he loved her. Quite a long time ago.

Steven regarded the teens for a long minute before nodding, "You're right. I'll fetch Alice and meet back here in ten minutes or so. Should you fetch Sirius and Remus?"

Wincing, Harry admitted, "They already know, but I'll get them just the same." To save me from the dreaded wrath of the father in law.

An annoyed snort escaped the former Staff Sergeant Granger as he rose to find his wife. He was displeased that he and his wife were the last to find out.

Ten very short minutes later, the Family was gathered to discuss The Secret.

.oOo.

Harry and Hermione were seated on a divan. She was so close to Harry that she was almost in his lap. There was nothing sexual about it, though. She needed his presence and reassurance that all would be well. Despite her age, she loved her parents and feared their rejection.

Sirius, Remus and Dora were also present. All three were uncharacteristically silent Remus held Dora's hand, but other than that, they were in silent solidarity with the Potters.

A roar from the entrance hall fireplace announced the last member of the party. Minerva strode in the drawing room to the surprise of the Grangers. The Deputy Head of Hogwarts was puffing from her obvious hurrying.

"I apologize for being late. I had to finish up the sixth years early."

The Grangers were impressed that the professor thought this meeting important enough to cut short one of her classes. All present paused before turning to Harry and Hermione, expectation plain on their faces.

Softly, Hermione told her parents, "I want to start by apologizing." This surprised her parents and it was plain in their expressions.

"Since the beginning of the school year I've been holding back what we're going to disclose to you." Looking to her lap where her fingers were entwined with Harry's, she admitted, "I was afraid you'd...well, I guess I was afraid you'd turn me away if you knew the truth."

Neither Granger said anything, just nodded their understanding.

Harry took a deep breath, "We have the memories of our twenty seven year old selves." When Alice and Steven merely furrowed their brows, Harry continued, "By the time we reached twenty seven, Britain and the rest of Europe was in ruin. At the end of our fifth year, everything fell apart. Dumbledore was killed the day after Sirius died. Voldemort immediately overthrew the magical Ministry followed by the mundane a few years later."

Hermione spoke up, "We got you two out of the country before the wave broke. We stayed here to fight in the resistance while you two immigrated to St Louis. It was...bad here."

Harry gently wrapped his arm about his wife's shoulder. "Hermione and I married when we were twenty four. By that point, everyone we knew was dead, including everyone else in this room." Steven's eyes bored in on The Boy-Who-Lived while Alice mistily looked at the others in a new light.

"We were hiding in Cornwall when Hermione was killed," Harry told the assemblage. "I went round the twist but eventually figured out a way to send my memories back in time to hopefully prevent losing her. I performed the ritual on Hermione's grave and we think that had some influence on bringing her back in time with me, but we're not sure. In the end, though, it doesn't matter how; she did come back with me."

Now, Alice and Steven were regarding their daughter with considering expressions. Hermione summoned her Gryffindor courage to look her parents in the eye. What she saw caused her to begin to silently cry.

They were looking at her like they didn't know her at all.

Pulling her tight to him, Harry murmured soothing words to her. Minerva cleared her throat, "I'm sure you're having a difficult time believing all this, I know I did. I can assure you that they are telling

the truth." Reaching into her cloak, she withdrew her shrunken pensieve.

"This is a device that allows persons to view memories of others. Since you are not magical, you cannot enter the memory like we can, but we can display the memory over the bowl so you can view it." She set the miniature pensieve on the table before returning it to its normal size.

Steven shook his head slightly, "That's unnecessary, thank you for the offer though." His voice dwindled when he continued, "This explains everything."

"But..." Hermione croaked.

Looking lost, Alice turned to Hermione. "It's a bit much to take in. What happened to our daughter when you came back?" Hermione closed her eyes, crushed.

"She's sitting right there," Sirius answered with some heat. "She's still your daughter."

Steven stood, extending his hand to Alice. Helping her out of his seat, he told everyone, "We should probably retire before we say anything else we will regret. Please give us some privacy to think on this." He looked at the floor when he made his pronouncement.

When they left, Hermione began to sob. It seemed that all her fears had come to fruition.

"I've got you, honey. I've got you," Harry murmured to his wife as he wrapped her in his embrace. His attempts to console her fell flat as she was consumed in pain.

.oOo.

Remus, Sirius, Minerva and Dora sat in the drawing room after the Grangers and Potters had retired to their rooms. Sirius was irate. He finally had the beginnings of a new family after the nightmare that the Black Family had been as he grew up. Seeing Steven and Alice piss it away infuriated him.

Dora had crossed the room to go to Hermione when Remus had called, "Wait. Let her and Harry be for a bit. She'll want us later, but right now she needs him."

"I can't believe her Mum said that," Dora groaned. "She's her daughter for cryin' out loud."

Remus pulled his girlfriend down next to him. "They're hurt and confused. I'm sure that soon they'll be fine and be apologizing to our cubs."

Minerva and Sirius were quiet as they sipped their tea. Sirius gave a low growl before he slammed his cup down. Scowling, he stalked out of the room. Remus and Minerva exchanged a glance before Remus followed his best friend.

Dora and Minerva were quiet in their contemplation before the young witch broke the stillness. Softly, she told the older witch, "You know, I've always respected you. Being a Mistress of Transfiguration, the Deputy Head and Head of Gryffindor made you this larger than life person to me. You showed me that a witch could amount to more than a baby factory."

Puzzled, Minerva replied, "Thank you for the nice words, but your mother is a Healer..."

Laughing slightly, Dora countered, "That's my mum. Of course she's Superwoman." Trailing off, she stared out the window. Minerva could plainly see that the woman was working up her nerve.

"Why?"

Confused, Minerva blinked before asking, "Why have I pushed myself so hard?"

Shaking her pink topped head, Dora elaborated, "Why do you fight, when you have so much in your life to lose?"

Minerva's expression hardened. "They took my man."

"A lot of women were widowed and they didn't or don't fight."

The older witch cocked an eyebrow at Dora's impudence, but upon reflection shouldn't have been surprised. Andromeda Black had never been shy about speaking her mind, this trait had run true for her daughter. After a deep sigh, Minerva made a decision. Apparently, in the future that was, she'd told Harry and Hermione the details of the aftermath of Jamie's murder. Remus and Sirius knew the bald facts, but none of the details. Considering the situation, she felt that that baring her soul could help young Dora Tonks. The young woman was at a crossroads of her life and she needed as firm a grounding in reality as possible if she were to be true to herself.

"It was late, nearly eleven o'clock when the Death Eaters came. Jamie was closing up the house while I was upstairs getting ready for bed. I heard the shouting, so I scooped up my wand and Apparated to the parlour. That's where I found Jamie's headless corpse."

Minerva closed her eyes and swallowed the tears that threatened. In her mind's eye, she could plainly see the mangled remains of her husband as if it were just yesterday and not fifty years ago.

"As I said, I was getting ready for bed, so I was in a state of undress." Shrugging with one shoulder, she conceded, "That may not have made a difference, though. I killed six of them before they disarmed me. There were five of them that survived subduing me. They took turns raping me."

"Oh gods..." Dora choked. As a female Auror, rape was a very real possibility as a victim and as an investigating officer. It was discussed frankly during training. To have it happen to a friend, though, made it seem more real and more horrifying.

Her expression set, Minerva elaborated, "I fight so that others never have to suffer what I suffered. I fight so that young women can become old women with their man beside them every night. I fight so that young women aren't plagued by fear, nightmares and pain for decades. I fight for those who can't, because I can."

Minerva's steely gaze transfixed the pale faced young witch. "Because you can fight, because you can defend those who can't defend themselves, you too must stand against the darkness. You too, must do what you can to protect the innocent."

Turning to the door by which Harry and Hermione had left, she continued, "I made a serious error in judgement not too long ago. They," she nodded toward the doorway, "Warned me about young Malfoy and the others of his kind. I resisted doing what needed to be done. Part of me wanted to believe that young Draco was still a child and needn't trod the path his father had ploughed. To my shame, I didn't trust their judgment." She hung her head for a long minute. "Because of that, I allowed Ginny Weasley to be hurt in a very similar way to what I experienced.. After what she suffered last year..."

Shaking off the morbid castigation, Minerva refocused, "Harry and Hermione have given everything and still they fight. Despite their protests of not caring about the future of our society, they still fight. They may not work toward the reformation of our world, but they will save us all."

"I hope her parents appreciate it."

.oOo.

Standing on top of a small hillock, Hermione had been watching her mother for twenty minutes. Alice was sitting in a charmed section of Rowan Hill's formal gardens. One of Harry's ancestors had charmed and warded the area so that it was always a comfortable seventy two degrees and sunny regardless of the weather surrounding the patch of land. In one of the journals of his ancestor, Owain Potter, Harry found that it'd been called Cynnes Gardd; Welsh for 'Warm Garden'.

Alice was sitting on one of the many benches in Cynnes Gardd, staring at the enormous rose bushes. Even from where Hermione watched, over a half mile away, the sweet scent of the flowers tantalized.

A crunching from her left distracted Hermione. Turning, she saw Midnight slinking toward her. Harry had wanted a quick run to burn off some excess energy. It had been four days since the reveal of The Secret. Hermione had been devastated as her parents kept to their rooms, trying to sort out their feelings regarding their daughter's time travel.

Sirius had raged for the first two days. He wanted to eviscerate Steven and Alice for how they'd hurt Hermione by not immediately accepting her. In the end, Harry pulled him into his study.

"Sirius, I appreciate how upset you are for Hermione, but you've got to stop."

Angry and confused, Sirius retorted, "Why?"

Sighing, Harry sunk into his chair, "Because you're making it worse for Hermione. Every time you rant about how fucked up her parents are, it drives a spike into her heart."

"Oh," Sirius breathed, deflating. After a long minute, he nodded, "I'll give it a rest." Wagging his finger at his godson, Sirius' face became stormy again, "But so help me, if they kick her in the stones again, I'm going to skin them."

So Sirius had calmed down, which in turn helped Hermione. Her pain level decreased from Excruciating to Awful. In years to come, she would tell Harry that his constant presence and support allowed her to come through this phase in one piece. He put her first, his own desires and needs ruthlessly shoved to the side.

"Hey," she greeted him as he changed back to his human form.

Wordlessly, he wrapped his arms around her from behind. Grateful, she scooted into his embrace, relishing the protected feeling which washed over her. When he saw Alice in the distance, a split second decision flashed through his mind. Nodding to himself, he urged his wife, "Go. Go to her. I bet she's hurting as much as you."

Reluctantly, Hermione slid from his embrace to shuffle down the hill. Turning back to him, she saw him standing on the crown of the hill, the sun shining behind him. It was a scene from a fairy tale; Harry was The Hero, the last bastion of truth and justice. Nodding his reassurances to her, he whispered, "Go to her."

Turning back to the Cynnes Gardd, she squared her shoulders and strode off. Settling down on his haunches, Harry hoped he was right in reading the situation.

.oOo.

When Hermione passed the ward line to enter the magical garden, it was as if she'd walked through a portal to another world. The gloomy cold day of midwinter Wales fell away, leaving her in a near tropical setting. Shedding her coat and gloves, she hesitated.

Closing her eyes while drawing a deep breath, Hermione summoned her courage. Pushing her fear aside, she silently approached her mother. Sliding on to the bench next to Alice, Hermione waited.

For over five minutes the two women sat in the quiet, both staring ahead at the sights, neither seeing. Wrapped in their thoughts and feelings, it was a stormy moment for both as they each warred within themselves for differing reasons.

Overcoming her fears, Alice reached out, silently taking her daughter's hand. The storm in Hermione broke as she began to sob in relief. Mutely, Alice wrapped her daughter in an embrace. Tightly she held the product of her love of Steven, the flesh of her flesh. Unbidden, Alice, too, began to weep.

Eventually, both women calmed a bit and the tears dried up. From her mother's embrace, Hermione whispered, "I love you Mum."

"I love you too, Pumpkin. I'm so sorry for what I said."

Nodding, The Smartest Witch of the Age accepted the apology. "I understand."

From the hillock a half mile away, Harry Potter released the breath he'd been unknowingly holding. All was well or would be soon. Shifting to the black jaguar, he loped off to find his godfather.

.oOo.

"I'm sorry," Alice told her daughter.

Confused, Hermione asked, "For what?"

Looking at her entwined hands, Alice murmured, "It's silly, I know. But I'm sorry that I've not been there for you for all those years." When Hermione began to object, Alice caught her daughter's gaze as she rode over her, "As I said, it's silly, but I'm your mother. It's my

job to take care of you, regardless of your age. In the fall when we sent you off to school, you were our thirteen year old young woman and now you're our twentysomething year old married woman."

Hermione warmed at Alice's use of 'our' when describing her current state. Looking back to her lap, Alice finished, "And I wasn't there for you during your trials. I know it's irrational and ridiculous, but I can't help feeling that I've failed you."

Stunned, Hermione stared at her mother. "But what about the time travel?"

Shrugging, Alice replied, "Not much we can do about it now. At first I admit that I was horrified, thinking that the older you must have destroyed the younger you or some such. Your father brought me around on that. He reminded me what Sirius said: You are my daughter, regardless of your memories.

"I've been sitting here wondering how I could have helped you." Shaking her head in remorse with regrets that she couldn't put in words, Alice Granger sighed deeply.

"Mum...thanks." Hermione squeezed her mother's hand, "I understand, I think. I think you should know that when Harry and I convinced you and Dad to go to America...before...it was a huge relief to us. Knowing you were safe and out of their reach was immensely reassuring."

Alice wagged her head in a 'so-so' motion. Eventually Hermione internally conceded that she couldn't convince her mother she was wrong. With a grin, she admitted, "Now I know what Harry's always on about."

With a smile, Alice asked, "What's that?"

"He's always whinging that I'm so stubborn that I wouldn't admit grass was green if I was convinced otherwise."

Alice chuckled, "Your Dad also pointed out another upside to the whole thing. We don't have to deal with suitors or teenage angst. That's all done and settled."

Hermione smiled. "Dad's alright then?"

Pursing her lips, Alice replied, "You need to talk to your father. I'm not going to get involved. That's between the two of you."

Frowning, Hermione said, "You can't do that Mum, you can't leave me up in the air like that. Is he upset?"

"Not per se. Talk to him sweetheart. He loves you very much, as do I. Never doubt that." Patting her daughter's hand, she reiterated, "Talk to him."

.oOo.

Steven Granger was sitting on the balcony off the sitting room in the suite he shared with his wife when Hermione knocked on the door. Shuffling into the sitting room, he closed the French doors behind him as he called, "Come in!"

Hermione entered. As she turned her back to her father to shut the door, his expression tightened. Shaking his head, he moved to the fireplace with a grim expression.

Indicating she should take the seat across from him, Steven began. "Hermione, I shan't sport with your intelligence by telling you that everything is fine and dandy between us. It is not and we both know that.

"I also want you to know that you are my daughter and I love you more than my own life."

Hermione exhaled softly, the relief coursing through her like a living thing.

"I'm most disappointed about your dishonesty. I understand your reticence and fear, but I don't think we've ever given you cause to think we'd reject you out of hand."

Five separate examples flew to the forefront of The Smartest Witch of the Age's mind, but she held her tongue. Now was not the time to prove her father wrong.

"Time will help, but I need your word that you won't lie to me again. I don't want to know what you and Harry get up to," Steven visibly

shivered at the thought, "But tell me if you don't want to answer. Don't lie to me. I don't believe that is too much to ask for, do you?"

"No Dad. It's not," Hermione replied softly. "I promise I won't lie to you again. If there's a topic I'd rather not discuss, I'll tell you that, but I won't lie to you again."

"Thank you, Pumpkin. I believe you." He stood before pulling his daughter out of her chair to give her an enveloping hug, a warm 'Dad' type of embrace that only he could do.

After they resettled in their chairs, Steven's expression became uncomfortable. "There's something else. Something I've not spoken about to your mother and to be frank, I'm afraid to know the answer."

Worried, Hermione's smile melted into a frown.

Avoiding her gaze, he elaborated, "As I mentioned to you and Harry a few days ago, I was in 2Para and I've killed in service to the Crown. You two are both soldiers of a kind, aren't you?"

Slowly closing her eyes, Hermione saw where her father was going and dreaded having to answer the expected question but ploughed ahead in the new spirit of openness. "Yes, we are Dad. And to answer your next question; Yes, I have killed."

Slowly, Steven's eyes closed before his head dropped to his chest. "How many?"

Narrowing her eyes at his extremely personal question, she answered in the way she could, "Too many."

Softly, so softly that she wasn't sure she was supposed to hear, Steven commented, "One is too many."

"I served so that you could live safely. The Troubles were raging in the Seventies and early eighties...I never wanted this for you..."

After a long moment in silence while he digested the unpalatable truth, he told his daughter, "Of course, I'll say nothing of this to your mother. It's your story to tell."

Unsure, Hermione asked, "Should I tell her? Would it be better coming from you?"

Chewing on his lip, Steven muttered, "I don't like secrets...Yes, I think your Mum should know this." Turning to his daughter, he made a peace offering, "I'll tell her if you'd like."

"Thanks, Daddy, I'd appreciate that."

He nodded, lost in thought before something occurred to him, "Are you and Harry married?"

She shrugged, "We consider ourselves to be."

The next question was on his lips before he pulled it back, muttering, "I really don't want to know."

Hermione smiled sweetly, knowing what Steven was thinking about. The mischievous expression she knew so well stole over his face before he told her, "That tosser never even asked my permission!"

"Actually, Dad, he did. He wrote you and Mum a letter before he proposed. You said yes."

"Damn."

Pulling her Dad out of his chair, she told him, "Now you have a son to knock about with, scratch unmentionable places while drinking vast quantities of beer and screaming at the telly."

Brightening, he replied, "I do, don't I?"

"And you can add Sirius and Remus. The lot of you can go to the pub to be rowdy leaving us behind to enjoy the quiet."

"I do, don't I?"

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to all who reviewed the first nine chapters. Story status, as always, can be found on my Author's page on FanFiction(dot)net. There's a lot of Granger action in this chapter, but it's been building for a while. More action next chapter.

2. Recommendation for the chapter is Harry Potter and the Balm of Time by ladylaughalot (looks like there's a sequel coming too!). Like Harry Potter and the Three Travelers, this is a good story despite the inclusion of JKR's ridiculous plot device that is Horcruxes. I especially enjoy the inclusion of James and Lily in the mix.

3. I just gotta say that 'I Just Won A Free Toaster Oven' has got to be the best screen name I've ever seen. You go, man.

4. I'm not a lawyer so I have no idea if statements made by minors are available in the public forum. I needed a 'price', though. Without it, the events were ridiculously boring.

5. I don't think that my extrapolations of the Dursley's abusive behaviour are unsupported by canon. Think about the mind set of adults who call a child 'freak' or 'boy' in the most degrading manner possible. What kind of person would lock a child in a cupboard? We know that Petunia swung a skillet at Harry's head, chucking him down the stairs is the same type of behaviour. One doesn't swing a skillet at a person's head for fun, they swing it to do damage. Vernon's 'poke him with your Smelting's stick' comment is outrageous. He's encouraging his son to use a weapon to attack a child in his care. They never stopped when Marge put her dogs on Harry to the point where he was treed. Think about that for a moment. Someone orders a dog to attack your brother/nephew/child/neighbour and you do...nothing? With the rage the man displays repeatedly through the series, I have no problem believing that he beat Harry bloody. Again, JKR should be keelhailed for her blithe dismissal of Harry's treatment by his relatives.

6. It was asked in a review re: the attackers of Minerva and her late husband how they could be Death Eaters. They weren't. In To Stand Against the Darkness I used a similar situation where I rightly described the attackers as the Knights of Walpurgis, Grindlewald's supporters. I didn't want to get into the difference between Death Eaters and Knights of Walpurgis in this fic as it really didn't matter (and I'm too lazy to go back and change the previous chapter now that at least one of you has twigged this).

Chapter 11

"Harry, pass the peanuts, would you?"

Without taking his eyes off the television, Harry shoved the peanuts across the table to his godfather. Steven Granger, Padfoot, Midnight and Moony were watching the first round of the World Cup qualifying matches at the local pub, The White Stag. Well, if you consider a twenty kilometres 'local'. The Stag was the closest pub to Rowan Hill, though.

Moony and Padfoot had exchanged wistful glances after seeing the sign. Finally they headed in to find seats in the moderately busy establishment. Steven had raised his eyebrows to his son in law in an unspoken question.

"My Dad became a Stag..." he explained with a meaningful look. At Steven's wordless understanding, Harry finished, "His nickname was Prongs."

Clapping Harry on the shoulder, Steven murmured, "You're a good lad, Harry. I'm sure your Dad is proud of you." Forcibly changing his expression, he motioned to the door, "Come on, I've a fiver with Sirius that Uganda is going to flatten Ireland."

Shaking his head, Harry told his father in law, "Barking, you are. The Irish are going to slaughter Uganda."

With playfully narrowed eyes, Steven challenged, "And how sure of that assessment are you, Lord Harry?"

Rolling his eyes, Harry dug into his pocket. Pulling out a ten pound note he shoved it into Steven's hand. "That sure."

"You're on, boyo."

An hour later, Uganda was up on the boys from Eire, 2-0.

"What the bloody hell are they on about?" Sirius demanded as he waved his hand at the telly. Remus leaned back in his chair, smiling. After a deep drink of his stout, he poked his friend in the ribs, nodding toward the door. Two old women toddled in, one leaning heavily on a cane. Remus was gentleman enough to want to curtail

his friends language in front of the women. The old ladies sat at the table next to the party from Rowan Hill, eyes glued on the television.

The wizened old woman leaned over to Sirius to ask, "Have the bloody Irish got their head out of their arses yet, or are the Ugandan's still kicking them about?"

The floored Sirius couldn't respond as Harry and Remus broke up with laughter. Steven replied for the horrified Padfoot, "Still 2-0 ma'am."

"Humph. Plonkers," she muttered as she waved her hand to the publican. Her attitude seemed to be permission for the lads to be a bit rowdy. Soon, the table was covered with empty pint glasses. Harry and Sirius cheered loudly as Ireland quickly scored twice in succession. The Stag was mostly full of football enthusiasts who were cheering for Ireland.

Harry had limited himself to two beers. He didn't want to get potted in public; a thirteen year old young man wasn't usually allowed to drink too much. Sirius and Remus, though, were completely sotted. At one point, Remus had thrown his arm over Sirius' shoulder as they began to sing a bawdy tune. Harry couldn't make out all the words but it seemed to be about a wizard's staff having a knob at the end and him taking it in hand.

The crowd thought it to be allegorical so they laughed along with the Marauders. Harry wasn't so sure, but laughed too.

In the end, it was a 3-2 Irish win, causing many hands to be thrown into the air in celebration. Steven handed Harry his ten pound note before paying off Sirius with a fiver, "The Africans are coming up. Don't be surprised to see them competing for the Cup in the next decade or so." Harry and Steven screened Padfoot and Moony as they surreptitiously cast Sobriety charms on themselves.

The men ambled out of the pub behind the two old Welshwoman who were conversing in their native language. As Harry made to pass them on the sidewalk, the older of the two grabbed his arm.

"Hold on a moment, young man," she told Harry in her lilting voice. "Are you a Potter?"

Taken aback, Harry dumbly nodded. Unknown to him, Sirius and Remus both inconspicuously drew their wands.

Shaking her head, the mostly toothless woman laughed. "Your father would have been James, then?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Evaluating him through rheumy eyes, she eventually smiled, "Good to have a Potter back in Gwynedd. Good day, my Lord."

With a warm feeling spreading in his chest, Harry turned to the rest of his Family, "Let's go home."

.oOo.

Snarling softly, Midnight prowled the edge of the wards guarding the Macnair house. On the far side of the ravine, Longtooth padded softly toward her mate, the short mane about her neck standing on end. Bumping her lover in the shoulder, Longtooth indicated toward the rendezvous point. With one last glare at the hostile wards, Midnight followed the lioness down the darkened path.

Meeting up with Padfoot, the three animagi transformed back to their human shapes before Hermione pulled a short rope from her pocket. When the others were touching it, she whispered, "Home."

Moments later, they arrived outside the front doors of Rowan Hill. Harry casually transfigured their clothes from black fatigues to jeans and sweatshirts. Hurrying in the mansion, Harry muttered, "Fonging wards were crazy."

"There was something about them that made me upset and angry. I couldn't think straight," Sirius offered.

Heading toward the library, Hermione summed up, "Hostile Confusion wards. They're like muggle repelling wards which distract unwelcome muggles. This ward tampered with our reasoning and made us angry. Give me a day or so to puzzle it out." She turned into the library without looking back. Sirius and Harry meandered through the house, ending up in Harry's study. They found Remus and Dora there, dancing to soft music from the wireless.

Harry smiled at the sight. Dora was tucked into Remus' arms, her head under his chin.

"Aww, now isn't this cute," Sirius drawled from behind his godson.

Not opening his eyes nor breaking rhythm, Remus replied, "Fuck off, Padfoot."

Sirius snorted as he moved to the sofa. Flopping down, he waved his wand at the wireless, silencing it. "The wards were insane. Longtooth says they're Hostile Confusion wards."

The dancing couple broke apart with Dora frowning. "The file didn't say anything about special wards."

Ever since the Azkaban assault, Dora had been their unofficial intelligence officer. Her access to the MLE files of known and suspected Death Eaters had been invaluable. After a quick Duplication spell, the Family had an extensive intelligence file on their target. Harry and Hermione identified the 'who' to attack, Dora had supplied the 'where' and the 'how'. So far, their intelligence had been perfect.

The MLE file on the Macnair residence had no listing for Hostile Confusion wards, though. "Confusion wards are very complex," Remus mused as he moved to the window. Looking out into the night time sky, he wondered, "Who cast them?" The 'why' was obvious. Six Death Eater homes had been torched on top of the destruction of Azkaban. Only a moron wouldn't realize that someone was hunting the jackal followers of the Dark Lord.

Muttering, he started listing, "Rookwood? No, he's dead. Malfoy – dead, Snape? Maybe. Severus is very capable, but he's not in Britain. The Lestranges are all dead..." Turning to the others, Remus asked, "Who has the money to contract the upgrades?" Not waiting for an answer, he asked Harry, "How much did the upgrades here cost?"

Furrowing his brow, Harry answered, "I don't remember the exact amount, but it was well over fifty thousand galleons."

While Dora whistled at the amount, Remus scratched his chin. After shooting an enquiring glance at his best friend, Sirius replied,

"Macnair has the cash to do it. Rowle didn't. Nott definitely does, so too does Ariadne Zabini. All those husbands of hers add up to a hefty inheritance." Tapping his fingers as he thought, Sirius muttered to himself. Standing, he told the group, "I'll be back." A few minutes after leaving the study, they heard the fireplace roar as Sirius used the Floo to leave.

Dora left to help Hermione in the library. Remus and Harry tried to pass the time by playing cribbage, but Remus was a poor player and gave up soon after they started. Steven Granger ambled into the room wearing sweat pants and a thick sweater. Seeing the anxious expressions on Remus and Harry, he asked, "What's the trouble?"

Harry explained, "The op tonight didn't go as planned. The wards were far more extensive and capable than we planned."

With a concerned frown, Steven moved to the secretary desk in the corner while holding out his hand to Harry. The Boy-Who-Lived opened a magical safe, withdrawing the file they had assembled on the Macnair house.

Steven read through it twice before he began to make notes. Fifteen minutes later, he asked, "Could I see the file for one of your successful ops?" Harry handed his father in law the file for the Malfoy home.

Harry and Remus watched Steven read both files, comparing the contents while taking more notes. Finally, he set his pencil down, sighed and turned to Harry, "Your intel source is compromised."

"What!" Remus and Harry chorused.

Pointing to the Macnair file, he elaborated, "The Macnair house file doesn't have this 'special' section that the Malfoy house does have. In the Malfoy file, this Paralysis ward is listed along with the Confundus ward. The entire section is missing from the Macnair file. It's also missing the 'magical creatures' section."

"Fuck," Harry moaned as he plopped into his chair.

"It could be mere sloppiness on the MLE's part," Steven offered, "But given the thoroughness and professionalism of the rest of the file, I doubt it."

Remus wordlessly beckoned for the files. Reading through them both, he eventually dropped them on the floor. "He's right."

"Do you think they've targeted Dora?" Harry asked.

"If they'd done that, you'd have people knocking on your door, boyo. No, I think they're trying to flush the game by omitting the information," Steven replied.

"Who?" Sirius asked as he entered the study, two thick books under his arms.

Remus explained Steven's hypothesis to his friend, causing Sirius to frown before dropping the dusty tomes on the floor. "I don't know 'who', per se," Steven offered. "But I know where they'll be tomorrow night."

Surprised, Harry asked, "Where?"

Pointing to the file, Steven replied, "At Macnair's house, waiting for you."

.oOo.

The entire family suited up for the next visit to the Macnair house in Staffordshire. It was the first time Harry had ever seen Minerva wearing trousers and he couldn't help but stare. Dora and Remus both wore grim expressions. The metamorph had taken the news regarding the hinky files well, but was very keen on finding out the person or persons who were investigating them.

Sirius was casting a quick spell to keep his bootlaces tied snugly. He had been quiet all day. The night before, he'd gone to the Black Manor at Grimmauld Place to find some resources on the old families. He'd not spoken of the trip to anyone other than to tell Remus and Harry where he'd gone. Based on his expression, Harry was fairly sure that Kreacher hadn't survived the visit.

Hermione was reviewing a tome which explained how to counter the Confusion wards. The process was highly illegal causing Harry to smile at the changes in his wife. Their first time through 1994, Hermione would have been aghast at the thought of breaking the

law, now she was actively learning forbidden magics so as to assault a home and subsequently kill the inhabitants.

The clock struck midnight when Steven ambled into the entry hall, Alice right behind him. Her eyes were red, but her expression cheerful. Hermione frowned slightly. Obviously, her father had filled her mother in on Harry and Hermione's lethal activities. There was nothing for it, now. Steven glanced over the group before nodding to himself. "I wish I could help, but my time for jumping out of perfectly good airplanes is over. Godspeed, my friends and family."

The Family nodded at his sentiments as they reached for their portkey. Harry cheekily grinned, "See you soon, Dad."

A faint smile graced Steven and Alice's faces. "See you soon, son," Alice replied.

.oOo.

Their entire plan had changed. Instead of assaulting the Macnair house, they were hunting their hunter. With four of their number being animagi, they were going to exploit the fact.

Upon arriving at their jump off point, Harry, Hermione, Sirius and Minerva transformed before bolting off to their prearranged sectors.

Remus had proposed that in trying to capture their quarry, they reverse the trap he or she had set for the Family. "The information in the altered file drives us to assault the house from the northwest. It's the most vulnerable section of the house, as listed here," he jabbed his thumb at the file. "Our investigator will be watching for us to attack from the northwest, then. I propose, we find him while he waits for us. So far, we've always gone between two and three in the morning. We'll go earlier and arrive farther away from the house."

Unfurling the map of the area, he quickly drew with his wand, "We'll divide up the area into these sectors..."

Harry and Hermione, being the fastest, had the sectors farthest from their jump off point. Running through the trees, Harry gave a toothy smile. All the time spent running over Rowan Hill was paying off as he wasn't even winded. Slowing as he heard Longtooth peel off behind him heading to her sector, Harry concentrated on hearing

and smell. They'd discuss that the animagi would most likely scent or hear their prey long before seeing him or her.

Nothing.

No deer, rabbits, witches, wizards, trolls or bugbears. Nothing. Narrowing his eyes in suspicion, Midnight began creeping through the forest. Five minutes later, he knew that their prey must be near. The forest is never completely quiet or free from nightlife. There's always something scurrying here or there. The only thing that would bring on this artificial calm was man. The absence of prey announced the presence of an invisible person.

A rustling to his left caused Midnight to freeze. The noise hadn't been too close, but neither was it far away. In complete silence, the black jaguar turned before slinking into a overlarge holly bush.

Harry let his animal instincts take over as he waited for his prey. Completely still and breathing shallowly, Midnight saw a ripple in the air ten feet to his front. The same distortion caused by a Disillusionment charm or a billowing invisibility cloak.

The wind shifted, bringing a familiar scent to his twitching nose. Midnight closed his eyes, focusing his attention on his hearing and scent. Sure enough, the target was moving right toward him.

He began to coil his legs for a leaping attack when the target appeared. It was Alastor Moody and he was a few feet from the holly bush. He tossed his invisibility cloak on a nearby branch before reaching for the buttons on his trousers.

Oh fuck no.

Just as Moody began to relieve himself on the holly bush – and Midnight inside it – Padfoot leapt on the old Auror from behind, bearing him to the ground. Harry quickly shifted back to his human form before stunning the old man.

Padfoot flowed into Sirius who wore a manically grinning expression. "I'm never going to live this down," Harry groaned.

.oOo.

"So let me get this right," Dora asked for the third time, "Moody pissed on you?"

Not bothering to reply, Harry ran the towel through his freshly showered hair. Three Cleansing charms followed by a shower allowed Harry to feel mostly clean. He'd already burned his clothes and he'd probably shower again before going to bed.

Hermione intervened, "What are we going to do with Mad-Eye?"

Remus and Sirius were especially silly as their only reply was subsumed in giggles. Minerva glared at the surviving Marauders before replying, "He fought with us before. Maybe he will again?"

This sobered all present. Hermione and Harry both frowned as they considered the idea. Alastor Moody had never been one for rules. His main rule was to survive long enough to kill the enemy. The secondary rule was to never let the bastards get an edge on you. Harry smiled at the self-recrimination and language Alastor was most likely going to use when they revived him.

Sirius nodded at Minerva's idea, "If it doesn't work, Midnight can Memory charm him."

They turned to the unconscious man who was tied to a chair in the corner of the room. "Hold on," Hermione urged. A few flicks of her wand Summoned two spare wands, five vials of potion, three knives and a shrunken broadsword. "Ok, go ahead."

Minerva rolled her eyes at her old friends' paranoia before casting the Reviving spell. The wily old Auror didn't move, not even to open his remaining eye. The magical eye, though, spun like a top.

"We know you're awake Alastor, stop playing possum," Harry ordered.

Holding up his grizzled head, the retired Master Auror opened his remaining eye as he scowled at the time traveling teen. Before he could say anything, Harry scolded, "Don't you start on 'Constant Vigilance' with me, Alastor. We nailed you with your old man in the wind."

"And pissing on you," Sirius whispered.

Minerva silenced the peanut gallery with a glare. Conjuring a chair, she turned to the old Auror. "Alastor, we've a story to tell you and then you have to make a choice."

"What's the choice?" he growled.

"You can help us or we cast a Memory charm on you before we return you to your house."

Scowling, he ordered, "Tell your story."

.oOo.

"That has to be the most ridiculous story I've ever fucking heard. It must be true," Moody proclaimed at the end of Minerva's recitation. Narrowing his eyes, he turned to Harry, "Swear on your magic the story is true."

Expecting something of the like, Harry drew his wand, grasping it midway to give his oath, "The story told to Alastor Moody by Minerva McGonagall is true in substance and fact." The bright white flash sealed the oath.

Moody opened his mouth but Harry beat him to the punch by casting the Lighting charm. "Satisfied?"

"For now," growled Moody. He was silent for a full minute before he told Minerva, "Untie me. I'll fight with you."

"And Albus?" Hermione asked.

Pursing the remains of his lips, Mad-Eye told her, "I don't like it, but I have to agree. Albus would get all goody-goody on us and we'd get nothing done."

Remus smiled while shaking his head. Sirius openly laughed. Winking his good eye at Minerva, he told her, "Come on, gorgeous. Let me out."

Minerva remembered a much younger Alastor Moody who'd been a third year Hufflepuff when she was sorted. He'd been a bit of a rake in his younger days. Time and experience had mostly snuffed that

out of him, but with old friends, a bit of Al Moody would poke through on occasion. "Jamie would have your pelt if he heard you say that Alastor," she chided as she ended the Binding spell.

Moody extended his hand to Harry, "Let's get this vow over with so we can get to work."

Ten minutes later, they were all sitting about a table in the study, a sleepy Steven Granger joining them. "How'd you twig us?" Harry asked the veteran.

Shrugging, Moody replied, "Didn't. Just seemed too easy. Every hit you made, the wards weren't ripped down. There was no sign of fighting outside the house, which meant you caught each of them by surprise. To top it off was the guards at Azkaban."

While most of the others were confounded by Moody's statement, Dora groaned. "Share with the class, cousin," Harry teased.

With narrowed eyes at The Boy-Who-Lived, Dora told them, "The only people who can make a portkey into and out of Azkaban are the Director of the MLE and the Head Auror. Even the warden can't enchant a portkey out of there. Since the guards were portkeyed out, he knew it had to be someone with access in the MLE. If they had access in the MLE, then they could have been using MLE intel files."

Smiling his scary smile, Moody told her, "Well done, Tonks. Keep it up and in a few years you might be good enough to write an after action report."

"Hey!" she countered, before Minerva waved her off.

"It's his way. Pay him no mind."

"So, are the active duty Aurors on our tail?" Remus asked.

Shaking his head, Moody replied, "Most of those snot nosed twats couldn't find their arse with both hands and a map to guide them. Shackbolt made some noise right after Azkaban burned, but to tell the truth, most of them cheered when the place burned. If, or rather, when Voldemort is resurrected, we all knew he'd spring those bastards." Turning to Harry, he asked, "Why Fiendfyre?"

Shrugging, Harry replied, "It was easiest and the most thorough."

"Let's talk about Macnair, then," Moody began with a smile.

.oOo.

Alice Granger eyed the disfigured and beaten retired Auror who sat across the breakfast table from her. "What's he doing?" she whispered to Hermione. The Smartest Witch of the Age smiled as she watched Mad-Eye cast a series of detection charms over his food. Reaching into a pouch on his belt he sprinkled a reactive agent on the eggs followed by a directed spell at the bacon. The coup de grace was when he cast Scarpin's Revealaspell over the tea.

Chuckling, she told her mother, "He's being Mad-Eye."

Alastor narrowed his good eye at Hermione, "Laugh as you will, missy. Just remember that I'm the only member of my Auror class still alive."

"That's because you're old, Alastor," replied Sirius from behind the paper. "They all died peacefully in their sleep of old age. You're too stubborn to die. Death himself can't sneak up on you."

Harry staggered into the room, his hair wet from his fifth shower in the last twelve hours. As Steven poured for Alice, the male Granger asked Harry, "So, do you make it a habit to have people urinate on you? Is this a fetish that Hermione..."

"DADDY!"

Chuckling to himself, Steven set the teapot back on the table. "Just funning with the lad, Pumpkin."

Ignoring the ribbing, Harry plonked into his chair before reaching for the coffee. He drank down two cups before he even spoke. "We going back tonight?"

Moody replied without looking up from his porridge, "Aye. I'm going back to check a few things. Your...wife...is on the right track for the wards." Watching Hermione with his good eye while his magical eye spun like a top, he told her, "We'll bust that ward. This time, I think

we'll have to go for brute force. It'll take too much time to finesse the wards. Knock 'em down, get in, hit 'em, get out."

Eyeing the severely maimed man, Steven observed, "You sound like you intend to go in with the rest of them."

Barking a disturbing laugh, Mad-Eye replied, "Haven't you heard of a broom?"

"Oh."

.oOo.

There was a reek on the wind that made Harry uncomfortable. He was perched in a tree high on the hill that overlooked the Macnair house. As Midnight, he scanned and rescanned the area, trying to pinpoint the source of the smell. Walking Death he thought to himself. That's what it smells like.

Off to his right, he heard Mad-Eye sideslip on his broom. Moody's old Oakshaft was a steady reliable broom that filled the bill for the crippled Auror. Disillusioned and flying slowly allowed Alastor to move nearly invisibly.

Softly, the Communication charm sounded in Harry's ear, "Anything? Growl if you've heard something, if nothing, remain quiet."

Debating whether to say anything, he decided to follow Alastor's motto. Growling softly, he heard a wand flick. A tap on his head signified Moody Disillusioning him.

After transforming back, Harry whispered, "There's something out there," he gestured toward the house. "I don't see it, but I smell it."

"Black said it smelled like death."

"Yeah. I've never smelled anything like it before." Turning to where he thought Moody was hovering, he asked, "Do we abort? I don't like it."

"It's the last clear night we'll have for a while. Storm front rolling in tomorrow and the weather will be shit for at least a week after that. I say we go. Meet at the insertion point in ten minutes."

Transforming back to Midnight, Harry hurried down the tree. Finding Hermione and Sirius waiting for him, he transformed back before cancelling Alastor's charm. Shortly, Dora, Remus, Minerva and finally Mad-Eye joined them.

"Minerva, you'll be going in with the troops. That smell bothers me and we'll need all the muscle we can get."

"Fine, but you're the overwatch then. You'll need to be at fifty feet at least to act as lookout and sniper."

Grunting, Moody fussed with his robes to stick them out of the way of his wand arm. Harry turned to Hermione, "You ready to knock down this ward?"

Hermione glanced about, got nods of readiness from the others before turning back to her work. For the last three hours, she'd been eroding this section of the wards to the point where a massive magical discharge would cascade the ward scheme. She would be incapacitated after the magical dump, but the plan called for her to be immediately portkeyed back to Rowan Hill while the rest assaulted the house.

"Love you," she murmured to Harry, reaching for his hand.

Taking her slim hand in his own, he squeezed, "Love you too, babe. See you in a bit."

She nodded before freeing her hand and closing her eyes. Raising her hands, she began to chant. It was an invocation from the cradle of life in the world. Deep in the back of the Potter Library had been a book that contained this spell of the Indus Valley. The spell was originally designed to facilitate healing, but what it did was bring the magic of witch or wizard fully to hand.

Her eyes flashed open glowing an iridescent blue-white. Power arced from her hands to the ground. Raising her arms in a gesture of defiance, Hermione braced herself. A guttural scream preceded an explosion of magic from the witch. As Hermione collapsed and

Harry slapped the portkey on her, the wards surrounding Macnair house flashed yellow then fell as the ward stone detonated.

Harry tapped the portkey with his wand, sending Hermione back to their bedroom where she should sleep off the effects of bringing down the wards. Sirius sprinted for the house, scanning left and right. Remus and Dora flanked him. Minerva was on Sirius' heels, moving quickly for an older witch.

Harry transformed to Midnight, sprinting to catch up to the group. As he raced over the lawn, the smell of death filled his nostrils. Shaking his head to clear the smell, he almost missed the first vampire.

A formless shadow streaked in from the right, slamming into Sirius. Instinctively, he transformed into Padfoot. Snarling and snapping, the Grim ripped and tore at his opponent.

As per the plan, Remus, Dora and Minerva continued to the house. Harry and the invisible Alastor headed to help Sirius.

It's never wise to engage a vampire at grappling range. Their preternatural speed and strength allows them to overwhelm most any opponent. Padfoot was not a normal opponent, though. Most people seeing Padfoot assume he's a huge Bernese Mountain dog or even a dark coloured Great Pyrenees. He's actually a Grim, with the capabilities and resistances that entails.

The Grim is a harbinger of Death; not just a death omen, but an actual bringer of Death, himself. Rapid healing, incredible strength and a fierceness to overcome any opponent are the most prominent attributes of the Grim.

The vampire tore at Padfoot's back with his indestructible nails, blood spurting from the cursed wound.

Padfoot didn't make a noise, merely turned like a striking snake and bit the offending hand. Clamping down with his jaws, he bit his undead attacker's hand off cleanly at the wrist.

The vampire shrieked. It was the last thing he did. Moody used the Levitation charm to lift the wounded and screaming being into the air. Suspended in mid-air, it couldn't use its spectacular abilities so it was nearly helpless. Harry transformed back to his human self. Not

even bothering to draw eleven inches of holly and phoenix feather, he pointed his open hand at the wounded vampire. With narrowed eyes, he incanted, "Incendio."

Two seconds later, the immolated vampire's ashes dispersed in the breeze.

Just in time for the next two vampires to arrive.

Harry was bowled over as the female vampire literally ran over him. Shaking his head to clear the instant muddle headedness, a section of his mind recognized the mental fog as the side effect of a concussion. Harry flicked his wand to the left and the right. Sharp pain shot up and down his left arm at the gesture; his left wrist and forearm had been crushed in the grip of the vampire. A quick Numbing charm allowed him to function as slabs of stone jumped out of the ground forming a protective wall around The Boy-Who-Lived.

As Harry got his bearings, he heard a hiss from above. Diving to his left to avoid the leaping attack, he dispelled the summoned barriers. Tucking his wounded arm into his side, Harry rolled thrice. A thump from behind indicated the vampiress had landed where Harry had been.

Jumping to his feet, a swipe of his wand sent a waist high arc of energy in the direction he thought the vampiress was. Off to his left, he heard shouts and spell fire while screams were heard further off.

The Area Effect Cutting curse missed the intended prey, as the blonde vampiress leaped over the spell. In a flash, she was moving toward him, arms outstretched, distended fangs gleaming in the half moon light.

Harry hadn't survived for so long because he was so good looking, there was more than a bit of truth in the stories about the combat prowess of The Boy-Who-Lived. In a second, his wand flashed the Detonation curse. Half a heartbeat later, the beautiful creature of the night exploded like a bomb.

Without pause for breath, Harry turned to find Sirius and Moony standing near the smouldering remains of another vampire. Sirius

was bleeding freely from the wound in his back, while Mad-Eye appeared to be unhurt.

"Let's get going," he ordered the other two. Moody swung his now visible leg over his Oakshaft while Sirius started toward the house. The former Prisoner of Azkaban got two steps before stumbling to his knees. When Harry got closer, he saw that the back of Sirius' robes were soaked with blood.

"Fuck," he muttered. Tapping the necklace about his godfather's neck, he activated the portkey back to Rowan Hill. After Sirius disappeared, he turned to Mad-Eye, telling the old Auror, "Go fetch Andromeda Tonks; She and Ted live in Cornwall. Tell her that she's needed at the house. She and Ted have their own portkeys. Have her tend to Sirius." Eyeing the old paranoid law enforcement officer, he told him, "She's one of the good guys, Alastor. Don't go overboard."

Not bothering to wait for a reply, he sprinted to the house casting what healing charms he knew on his damaged arm. He still heard spell fire and screams from the house. "What a fucking goat rope."

.oOo.

Remus stood over a wounded Dora, Minerva at his back. Around them half a dozen Death Eaters pounded the reduced assault team with spells of the darkest nature. Minerva was conjuring barriers with a deftness not seen since Albus Dumbledore defeated his lover in 1945. Seven Death Eaters were dead, while three more would be within the hour.

Unforgivables lanced through the air, crossing and recrossing the large banquet hall. On the whole, Death Eaters are thugs who have no compunction casting the Killing curse. That doesn't mean that they're great warriors. On the contrary, most Death Eaters are far too arrogant to bother with anything as mundane as target practice. Therefore, most can't hit the broadside of a barn with a bass fiddle.

Remus Lupin, on the other hand, spent fifteen minutes a day, every day, casting at targets slightly larger than a pea.

At ten metres.

While they were moving.

Dora had been taken down by a Bludgeoning curse from a Disillusioned Death Eater, fixing Remus to her location. Despite overwhelming odds, Remus and Minerva had still halved the opposition with a focused fierceness that was disturbing to the surviving combatants. When Harry ran into the room and saw Dora on the floor, he shouted, "Get her out of here! Now!"

Fluidly squatting, Remus took advantage of the Death Eaters' distraction by Harry's appearance by tapping Dora's portkey with his wand, sending her back to Rowan Hill and safety. With a fury Harry and Minerva had never seen, Remus systematically began to kill every Death Eater in the room.

Dodging under a sloppily aimed Cruciatus curse, Remus snapped off a Reductor curse, which popped a masked Voldemort fanboy's head like an overripe melon.

Spinning, he caught two with an Area Effect Cutting curse. Both were cut in half.

The combination of the Blinding curse and Piercing charm downed a fourth.

The fifth was killed by a massively overpowered Bludgeoning curse. It hit the female Death Eater in the chest, fracturing the woman's sternum and driving splinters of bone through her black heart.

"Wait!" Harry called. He Stunned the last Death Eater before Binding and casting the Paralysis curse on him.

Checking the man still had a pulse, he turned to the panting Remus and Minerva. Answering Moony's unasked question, he told his pseudo Uncle, "Hermione wanted to question one."

Gesturing to the immobile prisoner, he told Minerva, "Take this trash back to the house. Dobby knows where to put him." Nodding to Remus he told him, "I asked Alastor to fetch Andi. She should be tending to Sirius and Dora when you get back. I'll finish up here."

After the other two vanished under the pull of their portkey, Harry headed to the front lawn. Moving stealthily, in case there were other

'surprises' still waiting for him, Harry was able to dodge behind a large oak tree when he heard the distinctive pop of multiple Apparations.

"Fan out! No idea what's happening here, but be on your toes!" the distinctive voice of Rufus Scrimgeour called to what was obviously an Auror Response Team.

A little frustrated at not being able to finish their ritualistic destruction of the Macnair house, Harry vanished as he silently Apparated home.

.oOo.

"Fuck!" he snapped. Stumbling upon landing in the entry hall, he was unpleasantly made aware that the Numbing charm he'd cast on his shattered arm had worn off. His eyes watering with the pain, he staggered toward the sound of raised voices.

"Remus! Go get a quart of Skele-Gro, fifteen vials of Meshuggina's pain relief potion, a full gallon of Blood Replenishing potion and another quart of strengthening solution! Go goddammit!" Andromeda Tonks was in full Casualty healer mode.

When Harry stumbled in the room, she glanced at him, noticed his purpling arm, which was hanging at an odd angle before turning back to the departing Remus. "Make it two quarts of Skele-Gro!"

Without looking at Harry, she asked, "Just your arm?" Not waiting for an answer, she began waving her wand over the unconscious Sirius. Minerva was working on his wounded back. Apparently, the wound the vampire inflicted on Padfoot was cursed as both witches were having a hard time healing it.

"Concussion, too."

"Sit. Stay awake. I'll get to you in a bit."

Ten full minutes she and Minerva worked desperately on Sirius. After the first two, Harry began to worry. Tugging on Ted Tonks' sleeve, he nodded questioningly at his godfather.

"It was touch and go when he first came in. He'd lost a lot of blood. Andi stopped swearing a few minutes before you came in, so I think he'll be alright."

Exhaling loudly, he looked around, but didn't find the object of his search. He did see Steven Granger watching the makeshift triage with a sombre expression. Trying to stand made the world tilt topsy turvy, so Harry waved his father in law over to his side.

"Where's Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Sleeping in your bed. Alice checked her over and she seems fine, just exhausted. Alastor is up there now, checking her for Andi." At that moment, Mad-Eye returned to the stripped sitting room.

"How is she, Mad-Eye?"

"Magically exhausted, but her core is already recharging. She'll be fine by lunch tomorrow. Her mum is sitting with her. She'll call if anything happens."

No matter what happened to Harry, losing Hermione was and always would be his greatest fear. He sighed in relief at Alastor's news. "Dora?"

"Pretty ugly Bludgeoner to the back of the head. She'll be fine in the morning, but have a wicked headache." Smiling, he added, "She did alright the way Lupin tells it."

Eyeing Harry with a critical eye, he continued, "So did you. I was leery of your story but you did good out there lad." Extending his hand, he shook Harry's. "I'd fight with you at my side again."

Harry gaped. There was no higher praise from Alastor Moody. Before he could respond, Andi barged her way through the men surrounding The Boy-Who-Lived, "Bugger off, I've a patient that needs attending."

A quick Diagnostic charm by Andi confirmed Harry's gut feeling; a level two concussion combined with a crushed left forearm and wrist. Frowning, she cast a Numbing charm.

"I'll have to Vanish the bones in your arm. They're too far gone for rapid healing. Vanishing and regrowth via Skele-Gro is the fastest and best way. When Remus gets back with the potions, we'll do the arm."

Harry grimaced. "Joy."

Digging through a black bag, Andromeda ended up shoving her arm in all the way to the shoulder. Harry heard numerous vials clinking in the bag before she softly exclaimed, "Ha!"

Handing Harry a light brown vial, she ordered, "Drink it."

Frowning, Harry asked, "What is it?"

As Alastor nodded approvingly, Andromeda scowled, "It's a bloody Concussion Potion, now drink it young man!"

Surprised at her vehemence, Harry cocked an eyebrow. Ted softly laid his hand on his wife's forearm. He caught Harry's eye before he nodded to the conjured cot on which Dora was sleeping.

Nodding his understanding, Harry popped the vial open before downing the goop in one go. After involuntarily shuddering, Harry murmured, "I'm sorry about Dora. She'll be alright?"

Nearly shouting, Andi replied, "Yes she will. No thanks to you."

"Andromeda, that's enough," Minerva scolded. She was wiping her hands on a rag as she walked over to the small party. Sirius was on his stomach, apparently sleeping. "Dora's injuries aren't Harry's fault, so don't take our your fears on the lad."

In a low undertone, Andromeda declared to the room, "There is something going on here and I demand to know what it is." She paused before tearfully choking out, "My daughter could very well have brain damage from that spell. Someone better start talking and do it right now."

Sighing, Harry sat back in his chair. Rubbing his eyes with his good hand, he told the upset witch, "Tomorrow. After lunch we'll have a sit down."

Surprised that Harry answered her, it took a moment before she regrouped. "Harry..." she began ominously.

"Goddamit Andromeda would you fucking grow up! Your daughter will be fine. Your cousin will be fine. Both of them will be fine, as a matter of fact," Harry added with a scowl. "So back the fuck off. We've just been in a fight for our lives so your desires fall to the back of the bus, all right? Give it a rest." He let his glasses drop back to his nose so he could properly glare at the outraged witch.

Stiffly, Andromeda replied, "Very well. We'll wait until tomorrow." Fortunately, at that moment, Remus returned with a sack full of potions. Without preamble, Andromeda Vanished the crushed bones in Harry's arm. Just like during second year, he arm became a floppy useless thing.

"Crap," he muttered. Turning to the calmer Andi, he asked, "Could I take this in my bedroom? It's going to be hard enough to sleep with this," he gestured to the distinctive bottle of Skele-Gro, "Working on me. Might as well be in my own bed."

"That'll be fine. How much do you weigh?"

"Sixty kilos."

She measured out ten ounces of the noxious potion, handing it to Harry. "Apparently you know the drill. I'd recommend walking to your room before taking it. I can't give you a pain relief potion, I'm sorry. It would interfere with growing the new bones," she added with an expression of real regret.

Andromeda wasn't a bad woman, far from it. She was a scared mother and there are few beings on the planet who are more passionate. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything anyone could say to her to assuage her fears until she had all the facts and could then decide for herself.

Nodding, Harry slowly moved to the door. Alastor whispered to him, "Stun yourself. It's always got me through the worst of it."

"Thanks, Alastor. I think I will."

.oOo.

Harry swam to the surface of consciousness around two in the afternoon. Blindly reaching out with his left hand, he winced at the residual pain, but was heartened by his ability to control the arm with its regrown bones. He was heartened further at Hermione's reply to his hand.

"Hmmm, good to see you're awake lazybones."

"I'll have you know that I'm a warrior recuperating from an intensive battle last night."

"Bollocks. You're a lazy bum. Now fetch me tea."

Snorting at what passed for humour in his wife when she was just awakened, Harry called, "Dobby."

When the major domo of Rowan Hill appeared, Harry asked, "Could you please bring tea for Hermione and coffee for me?"

Moments later, the house elf returned with the appropriate beverages. Smacking his lips at the revolting taste in his mouth, Harry cast a Breath Freshening charm. "How are you feeling?" Hermione asked.

"Well enough. The arm is still a little tingly but my head is clear." Turning to his wife, he asked, "You?"

"A little tired, but fine otherwise."

"Andi was a tad upset last night. She obviously knows something is up. With Dora taking one in the noggin, she was furious and wanted to know the story."

Wincing, Hermione muttered, "Not again," in reference to their encounter with Neville when they captured Wormtail.

"I'm not really comfortable telling her, even with a Vow," Harry admitted. "Especially with a Vow. She could die...I don't know..."

"We don't know her well enough to want to tell her the truth. Everyone else has been integral to our family either 'before' or

currently," Hermione summed up. Harry's silent nod indicated his agreement.

Heaving himself out of bed, he tentatively started toward the bathroom. When he wasn't dizzy or showing any other signs of a lingering concussion, Harry strode into the bathroom to clean up for the day. He needed to talk to Sirius.

.oOo.

"It's up to you two. I think she's trustworthy, but you're right; the probability a secret stays a secret is inversely proportional to the number of people you tell."

"And we've told a lot of people," Hermione finished for Sirius.

Nodding, the twelfth Earl of Blackmoor lay back on his pillows. The wound inflicted by the vampire was healed, his blood loss replaced via potion and all the aches and pains dealt with via medicine, but Sirius was still weak. Andromeda had told him to expect to be at less than full capability for a week or so.

Padfoot, Midnight and Longtooth were conferring in Sirius' bedroom. Moony had left a few minutes before to check on his girlfriend. Minerva had left first thing in the morning to return to school in time for classes. Dora still hadn't woken and the house was becoming worried.

Remus had summed up the problem at hand thusly: "If we tell her we're the Fiendfyre Vigilantes, she'll go crazy unless we tell her about the time travel. Without that little nugget, we're no better than the Death Eaters. It comes down to whether you trust them enough with your secret."

"Do you?" Harry had asked.

Shrugging, Remus gave a half smile, "They were, or will be my in laws. My perspective is skewed."

"I trust your opinion, Remus," Hermione had told him.

"Andi and Ted are good people. I believe that, with a Vow, you can trust them. They won't work against you or us."

Harry realised what he'd been doing. He had tried to have Sirius and Remus make the decision for him when it was his and Hermione's to make. Turning to his bride, he asked her, "What do you think?"

Slowly, she told him, "I think...we should trust our family. Let's tell them."

Sighing, he nodded his head. "Alright then."

.oOo.

"Wake up asshole."

The frigid water thrown in the man's face completed what the Awakening spell had started. The captured Death Eater, whose name was Alan Tigue, shook his head before blinking at the bright light in his face.

"I know it's a cliché, but I had to have a bright light to interrogate the bad guy, even if you're a worthless sod. They'd vote me out of the union otherwise."

"Wha...?" Tigue muttered before Sirius punched him in the stomach. Since he was tied to the chair, Tigue couldn't lean over to retch, so he opened his mouth choking and coughing.

Smiling, Sirius poured the correct dosage of Veritaserum in the man's mouth before pinching his nose shut while holding his mouth closed.

From behind the bound and seated Death Eater, Hermione told her godfather in law, "He doesn't have to swallow it. It'll be absorbed through the tissues in his mouth."

"Don't kill my buzz. This is fun," Sirius panted. When Tigue went slack, indicating the potion taking effect, Sirius slumped into a chair, worn out from the minor exertions.

From behind the captive, Hermione asked, "Who is your leader?"

"Macnair."

Frowning, she turned to Harry who amplified the question, "Who is leading all the Death Eaters? What is Macnair's role?"

"Don't know. Macnair leads our cell."

Muttered oaths and other swearing filled the room. "When did you join the Death Eaters? How were you recruited?"

"A month ago. Macnair approached me at work. He told me the Master was returning soon. We could put the mudbloods and blood traitors in their place."

"Did Macnair say how Voldemort was going to return?"

"He said Snape was going to do it. We needed to be ready."

A cold pall fell over the cognizant occupants of the room.

"Did he say when Voldemort was returning?"

"No, just soon."

The previously silent Alastor Moody interrupted, "List all the Death Eaters and their headquarters of which you are aware."

Harry glanced at the Dict-a-Quill and watched it transcribe the listing. He wasn't listening to the man. One thing reverberated through his thoughts.

Soon.

.oOo.

Harry snorted as he remembered Alastor's last question to the drugged Death Eater: "What don't you want the Fiendfyre Vigilantes to know about Death Eaters and their operations?" It was a stroke of genius that he'd never considered. Veritaserum compelled the affected person to be truthful, but not necessarily forthcoming or even expansive. Moody's question bypassed that drawback.

Dora was finally awake and Mad-Eye had been right; she had a pisser of a headache. Andi and Remus were with her, Ted had to run into the bank to take a leave of absence. Sirius had already

contacted Scrimgeour to inform him of Dora's injury 'falling down the stairs'. With the metamorph's clumsiness already legendary in the DMLE, no one had questioned the story. Mad-Eye had returned to his day job. Coordinating the search for Severus Snape was a nightmare of bureaucracy.

Holding Hermione's hand, they drifted into the family sitting room. Remus was standing by the newly stoked fire, warming his hands. Dora was spread out on a fainting couch, a warm blanket in her lap.

The rest of the Family was littered about the room. Steven was reading, Alice was occupied writing a letter to her aunt. Sirius and Ted were playing chess while Andromeda looked out the window, watching the midwinter rain. Harry headed to the tea service, pouring for himself and Hermione. Handing over her drink, Harry sat next to her. When Harry's saucer and cup clinked on the table, Andromeda rounded on everyone.

"Right. Let's have a discussion where you all tell me what the hell is going on here. Sirius?"

Rolling his eyes, Sirius lounged back in his chair, "Andi, first off calm down. We won't have this discussion if you're biting off heads. We're the good guys. I understand you're worried about Dora, but she's fine. Calm down."

Ted silently moved to his wife's side. Steering her to a couch, he gently pulled her down next to him. Laying a soft hand on her arm, he whispered in her ear. A look of resignation crossed Andromeda's features before she acquiesced, "Sorry everyone. Been a bit high strung."

Sirius nodded, accepting the apology for everyone. "Before we begin, we'll need an Unbreakable Vow from both you and Ted that you won't willingly disclose any of the secrets we're about to reveal."

One of the many things Harry, Hermione and Sirius had discussed was that Sirius should take the lead in the discussion with Andromeda and Ted. The Tonks didn't know about the teens time traveling, so would look to Sirius or Remus to explain the situation. They'd most likely dismiss Harry and Hermione.

Dora jumped in before her parents could comment, "Mum, Dad, I'm under a Vow as well. It's the same wording that Sirius just described." The serious expression on their daughter's face threw the elder Tonks for a loop. "I'd highly suggest you do as they ask. The facts are important enough to warrant an Unbreakable Vow and on top of it, we're all family here." Poking Remus in the side, Dora added, "Or will be soon enough,"

Everyone smiled briefly at the witticism before turning to the Tonks with an expectant expression.

"I don't like it," Andromeda declared. "I don't like being asked sight unseen to commit our lives to protect your secrets."

Sirius shrugged nonchalantly before turning back to the chess board. "Then you don't get to learn the secrets. You brought this up, not us."

Silence blanketed the room for a full minute. Sixty seconds doesn't seem like a long time, but it was an eternity, for different reasons, to all present.

Alice and Steven sympathized with Andromeda and, to a lesser extent, Ted. They too had been kept away from The Secret until demanding to be told. Their lack of magic was the only reason a Vow hadn't been required from them. Both Grangers reflected that they would have agreed to the magical commitment, if they'd had the ability.

Sirius wished Andi would get off her high horse. She'd done this throughout her life; get all worked up and outraged over stupid shit before settling down, usually at Ted's prompting.

Dora was annoyed. She knew her parents both had a hard time seeing and treating her as an adult, but this was too much. "Mother, get over it and agree to the Vow."

"Nymphadora..."

"Dammit mother!" The shout from her daughter caused Andi to first gape; slack jawed, before shutting her mouth with an audible click. "I am an adult, an Auror and know far more about this than you ever will. Would you listen to me for once in your life!"

Not wanting to air his family's dirty laundry in public, but wanting to finish his wife's tantrum, Ted told his wife and daughter, "Enough." Turning to his spouse, he told her, "Andi, I'm willing to commit to a Vow like Sirius outlined." Giving his cousin in law a mischievous grin, "Of course, the solicitor in me will want to debate the wording.

"We lose nothing by agreeing to keep their secrets."

In an undertone, the sane Black sister replied, "But what if the secret's horrible?"

"Do you really think our family could be horrible?"

She sighed, deflating. "You're right."

Facing Sirius, she told him, "I'll agree to a Vow."

Sirius turned to Harry, "Your show Midnight."

Confused, Andi and Ted turned to the thirteen year old wizard. Crossing the room, Harry extended his hand to enact the Vow with first Ted then Andromeda.

Settling back in his seat, Harry began the story, "Hermione and I have the memories of our twenty seven year old selves..."

.oOo.

"Dear Lord."

"You're the third person to have that reaction to our story," Harry joked.

When he got no response to his jibe, he subsided with a slight frown. Minerva had been struck dumb for a long moment, but quickly accepted the truth when told the story. Sirius and Remus both readily accepted it. Dora had been revolted by the future that was, but accepted the truth of the story. Fred and George had accepted the truth without question. Alice and Steven had been disturbed by the implications of the time travel, but had never disputed the truth of the story. Harry didn't like that the most recent hearer of The Secret appeared to disbelieve.

Harry glanced at his wife. She had a slight frown and furrowing of her brow as she watched the Tonks' assimilation of the facts.

"It's...it's a bit much to believe," Ted declared.

Frowns now ringed the room. Sirius jumped into the fray, "You don't believe?"

"Well..."

Rolling his eyes, Sirius snarked, "Do you really think we'd go to all the trouble of shoving an Unbreakable Vow down your throat so we could prank you?"

"No, not really." Ted replied lamely.

A tad angry, Harry stood, "Believe or disbelieve, it makes no matter to me. You demanded the truth, now you have it. Remember your Vow." Striding from the room in a huff, The Boy-Who-Lived headed for the indoor pool. He needed to work off some stress and fifty laps sounded like a good way to accomplish that goal.

Thirty minutes later, Hermione slipped into the pool with Harry. She was wearing a one piece suit that was much more practical for exercise than a bikini was. With her hair under a cap, she swam twenty odd laps before pausing to rest. Harry was waiting for her, sitting on the end of the pool, his legs dangling in the water.

"All right?" he asked.

"A bit disappointed. I'd hoped they'd be as enthusiastic as the rest when we told the story."

"Me, too."

"It could be that the combination of a dystopic future, time travel and the big reveal that we're the Fiendfyre Vigilantes could have thrown them," she observed.

"True," he grumbled.

As she spoke, Hermione puzzled through the Tonks' reactions. "They're just people, love. Normal everyday people. Andi is a healer and Ted's a solicitor. They aren't involved with the shaping and breaking of the pillars of society."

Harry snorted, "And we are?"

"Actually...yes, we are. You're the Chosen One and I'm your wife. Your godfather is the Earl of Blackmoor and in a few years we'll be the Earl and Countess of Richmond. Minerva is the Deputy Head of the most prestigious magical school in Europe if not the world. We are involved in the shaping and breaking of the pillars of society."

"Maybe, but how, then, do you explain Arthur Weasley?"

Looking into his wife's bemused face, he told her, "Arthur Weasley was a good man, but just an everyday man. He loved his family, listened to Quidditch on the wireless and worked his job the best he could; just like ninety percent of society does."

Staring off out the windows at the setting sun, he mused, "Something inside him said, 'no more' causing him to stand up and be counted. He had everything to lose – and did lose in the end – yet he still stood against the tide of evil. Prophecy isn't the decider for a man or a woman. Do you really think that if Muriel Weasley hit Voldemort in the neck with a Cutting curse it wouldn't kill him? That old goat fucker Dumbledore was right back in second year; our decisions are what matter. Minerva is another example alongside Arthur. They chose to do what was right, regardless of the cost. It's the same decision in front of Andi and Ted. In front of all of magical Britain, really. It's the same decision they had when Fudge and Umbridge tried to 'silence' me. They chose to do what was easy."

Gently, Hermione took his hand as she pulled herself out of the pool. "Love, Arthur was and Minerva is extraordinary persons. You, Sirius, Remus, Dora and even me, we're all out of the ordinary in that we feel very strongly about doing what is right. Why do you think we have such a close knit family? If my Dad was able, he'd strap up with us for any of our Ops. Andi and Ted...well, they're just people. They're not bad, just not extraordinary so that they'll suit up when the bad guys come calling."

Scowling at his hands as they lay in his lap, Harry affirmed, "Ok, I see that. However, I won't fix them...the rest of magical Britain. It's just like when Voldemort resurrected himself after the third task. The vast majority of people couldn't be arsed to get off top dead centre long enough to give a shit. It's not my job to save our society and I won't get in the middle of it. The bigotry, the oppression of those not pureblood...I won't do it. Someone else needs to pick up the pieces of our society. I'll kill Voldemort. Him and his worst followers, but the rest of Britain can fuck themselves. Voldemort didn't invent pureblood bigotry. He didn't make the laws or institutionalize racism. British Wizards and Witches did that for the last millennia. He just took advantage of their narrow mindedness."

Turning to his wife with his eyes ablaze, he declared, "I'll save them, but they must save themselves, too."

He was toppled backward as Hermione catapulted herself on top of him. Harry was a bit stunned when she tugged on his swimmers, pulling them down. "That was so hot," she groaned in his ear.

Smiling to himself, he was always amused that Hermione was turned on when he used his brain to take a moral stand. While kissing her, he Apparated them to the master bedroom.

.oOo.

At two in the morning, one of the fireplaces in the atrium for the Ministry of Magic burned green. Alan Tigue spewed out of the fireplace. The night watchman, George McPherson, ran over to the man who was laying prone on the marble floor. Rolling the unmoving man over on to his back, George looked into the blank face of a man who'd had his entire life erased by a massive Memory charm.

.oOo.

The next morning, Harry and Hermione meandered down to breakfast. Sitting next to Sirius, they muttered their good mornings. As Harry poured Hermione's tea – dash of milk, no sugar – Sirius told them, "Andi and Ted left last night. They committed to keeping the secret, but didn't feel comfortable staying."

Harry sighed, deflating a bit. Turning to Hermione, he saw he shrug in helplessness. He asked his godfather, "Did we do the right thing telling them the truth?"

Deliberately, Sirius folded the paper before setting it next to his plate. "Yes. We did our part by them. We were honest and upfront with them and family can ask for nothing more. The fact that they didn't like the truth is on them, not us."

Fixing Harry with the most solemn expression Padfoot had ever had, Sirius told him, "We did the right thing."

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to all who reviewed the first ten chapters. Story status, as always, can be found on my Author's page on FanFiction(dot)net.

2. Recommendation for the chapter is Coming Back Late by Paracelsus. A very good read post book 7. Dumps the crapilogue while having a very interesting examination of what being the Master of Death might really mean.

3. Why didn't Alastor see Midnight in the bush? Because it was too funny for Moody to take a piss on Harry, that's why. Also, NO there will be no romance between Moody and Minerva. *shudders* Really people!

Chapter 12

"Read this."

Harry picked up the book Sirius had just tossed in his lap. Reading the cover, he saw that it was Transfiguration Mastery. Furrowing his brow, Harry looked to his godfather for an explanation.

"The way you told it, you and Hermione had a haphazard self-taught curriculum after your OWLS, right?" When Harry nodded, Sirius told him, "That book is the most comprehensive NEWT level and beyond Transfiguration book that's for sale. I talked with Minerva about your course of study. She recommended it for you and Hermione to take your skills to the next level."

"Er, thanks," Harry replied. "But why?"

"I've watched you and Longtooth on our raids. You guys are very charm heavy in your spellcasting. Do you know why Remus, Minerva and Dora survived the Macnair house raid? Cause Minerva is a freakin' genius with Transfiguration, that's why. Moony told me that she had that bloody house attacking the Death Eaters all the while she was creating defences around the three of them. You two have power to spare, so the magical drain caused by massive repeated Transfiguration shouldn't be a problem."

Pointing to the book, he added, "I'd be a poor godfather indeed if I didn't tell you that you and your wife need to take your spellcasting up a notch. "

Screwing up his face in consideration, Harry pondered the problem. The only time that he or Hermione had been wounded since coming to the past was when a vampire had hit Harry with a sneak attack. They'd been very successful in their efforts. At the same time, they hadn't faced any capable opponents either or in large numbers of opposition. Flipping through the book, he saw a series of topics that might as well have been written in Russian, as he'd no idea what the book was saying.

Standing, Harry nodded to his godfather, "We'll get on this today. Thanks."

"I gave Hermione a copy, too. If you need any help, give a shout. I'm not too bad at Transfiguration."

"Right. Thanks again."

.oOo.

They were in the library studying after dinner when it happened.

Harry groaned before he leaned back in his chair, rubbing his forehead. With controlled desperation, Hermione fearfully asked, "Harry, what is it?" Having seen him suffer far too many times from his connection to Voldemort, she recognized and dreaded what was most likely happening.

Without warning, Harry loosed a scream of fury. He stood, his body taut and tense. Jumping from her chair, she ran around the table they were using. He was pummeling his fists on the table in rage as a scene unfolded in his mind. Tears ran down his face as blood seeped from his scar.

"Oh, God," Hermione murmured as she approached him.

Suddenly, he collapsed. Crumpling to a ball on the floor, he panted in pain, falling unconscious.

"SIRIUS!" Hermione screamed.

.oOo.

"Should we call Andromeda?" Alice asked.

They were in the master suite watching Harry who'd been unconscious for the last three hours. Hermione was under the covers with her husband, curled up at his side. Sirius, Remus, Alice and Steven sat in chairs waiting for The Boy-Who-Lived to awaken.

When Hermione didn't respond to her mother's question, Sirius demurred, "We could, but from what Hermione says, he'll be alright shortly."

"But he never passed out before, the visions always just hurt him. One time he was sick during fifth year because of a vision, but he

never passed out," Hermione observed. Her tone was detached, as if she wasn't involved. This scared the others more than Harry's fit.

Tentatively, Alice slid on to the bed next to her daughter. The silk sheets rustled a bit but neither Hermione nor Harry flinched. Gently Alice placed her hand on Hermione's unresponsive shoulder. "Sweetie, he'll be alright."

"And you know this how, mother?"

Taken aback at the quiet vehemence in her daughter's tone, Alice was quiet for a long moment. "He will," she reaffirmed.

Ignoring her mother, Hermione gathered Harry deeper into her embrace. Five very long minutes later, she told the rest of her family. "I've got a hint of what Harry went through when I died. I don't want to go on if he won't wake up. Nothing else matters."

Steven and Alice exchanged a worried glance as Remus rose from his chair. He recognized the situation for what it was. Taken by itself, this 'issue' with Harry falling unconscious wouldn't have bothered Hermione so badly. However, with the ever looming threat of Voldemort combined with the fact that this was the first vision Harry'd had in this timeline, Remus admitted to himself that Hermione's panic must be at near crippling level. Squatting down on his haunches, he placed himself in Hermione's sightline. Unsure as to whether she was seeing him at all or looking through him, he asked her, "Do you trust me Longtooth?"

Her response was adrift on the breeze, "Yes."

"Trust me that he'll be well in time."

Minerva entered the room. Seeing the positions of the others, she quietly conjured a chair. Taking a seat, she and the others continued their vigil. It was to be a long night.

.oOo.

Hermione's gaze alternated like a metronome. For two seconds she would watch the unconscious face of her husband. The next two seconds she'd watch the clock. Face. Clock. Face. His breathing

was as regular as a man asleep. Is he merely sleeping or unconscious? Shaking her head to clear the distracting thoughts, she refocused on her man.

It was four twenty two in the morning when Harry woke.

"Fuck..." he muttered.

A small tear of relief escaped the corner of her left eye. Softly, she told him, "Language, my love."

A fleeting smile flitted across his face before melting. "Sorry," he whispered.

"Are you alright?"

Without opening his eyes, he reached for her. Pulling her to his chest, he told her, "We'll talk in the morning. Things like what happened have more power in the dark. Just love me."

So she did. Holding him to her, she loved him with all her might.

"If the sun refused to shine, I would still be loving you. Mountains crumble to the sea; there would still be you and me..."

She recognized his words as the lyrics to a song, but the name escaped her. The swelling of her heart threatened to overtake her senses. Gratitude, love, affection...all these focused on the man in whose arms she rested. Without him, all was ashes in her mouth. Without him, the sun was dark on the brightest of days while the chill froze the marrow of her bones on a summer's day.

"I love you, Harry James."

"As I love you, Hermione Jane."

.oOo.

Breakfast in bed was a necessity this morning, not a luxury. While alert, Harry was still weak from the powerful vision the day before. One by one, the Family drifted into the master suite. When Sirius pulled up a chair to the table Minerva had conjured, Harry had to smile despite what had happened. Sirius' hair was standing straight

out from the left side of his head. His hair combined with the dopey expression, Padfoot was the epitome of the 'lazy lord' come to table.

Amongst the clink and clatter of a large family breakfast, Harry watched his Clan. They weren't kinfolk, but they were his Family. When Hermione shoved a bowl of porridge under his nose followed by a mug of tea, he succumbed to her will. Shovelling a large spoonful of the oaten goodness in his mouth, he thanked the Divine for his Family.

Eventually, everyone had fed. Minerva took a fortifying sip of tea before asking, "What happened, Harry?"

Deciding to rip the bandage off, Harry told them, "Voldemort is in a homunculus form. Last night Snape and two other wizards performed the ritual."

Minerva closed her eyes in dread. Sirius dropped his head into his hands while Remus slumped into his chair, despair creeping over the surviving Marauders like a cloak. Dora soundlessly shook her head, trying to negate the tide of news. Alice and Steven sat in stunned silence. Alastor was quiet, trying to digest the news, but failing.

Only Hermione was strong. Squeezing Harry's hand, she let him know that she was there for him. "What does that mean for the situation, son?" Steven asked in a low, even tone.

"It's the first step for him towards his resurrection."

Finding comfort in procedure, Mad-Eye spoke up, his tone professional and brisk, "Tell us what happened. No detail is too slight."

Closing his eyes, The Boy-Who-Lived swallowed thickly. "They had set up in a clearing in a pine forest. There were stars, but I couldn't make out any constellations in the sky. I could see no landmarks to identify where they were. A huge bonfire was roaring off to the side, but it seemed to be for heat and light more than anything. They had a baby boy...he couldn't have been more than a year old. He was cute." Gesturing to the top of his head, Harry absently remarked, "Had a little shock of red hair on his head....He was in a ritual circle when they forced a series of potions down his throat."

Alice and Remus began to silently weep.

"He screamed in his little voice," Harry continued in a detached tone. Wincos bounced about the room. "I could feel Voldemort's excitement. It wasn't just anticipation for this first step to his restoration, he was excited by the magic. It was nearly sexual for him."

"Dear God..." Minerva sighed, disgusted beyond belief.

"After five potions, they levitated a woman - the baby's mother if her hair colour, weeping and wailing was any indication - they levitated her overtop the boy. The shade of Voldemort slid into place between the boy and his mother just as they slit her throat with a stone knife. As her blood splashed over the baby, Riddle's shade merged into the baby.

"Snape then gutted the woman. As the balance of the blood and gore in her body splashed over her son, the baby's screams were horrible. He began to change to a humanoid thing that was vaguely reptilian with black and dark red scales. By the time she died, the transformation was complete. The last thing I remember is his inhuman glare at the world."

The silence was heavy and thick about the room. Dora was noticeably controlling her gag reflex before she bolted from the room to be sick. Even Alastor was grimacing. Finally, the old Auror asked, "What potions did they use?"

Absently shaking his head, Harry replied, "Don't know. The vials were all opaque."

Before Alastor could ask further, Harry added, "The other two wizards, or at least I assume they were wizards based on their height, were cloaked and hooded. I never saw their faces."

More silence.

"What do we do?" a newly washed Dora asked.

"We kill his scaly arse," Harry declared. His face, set and grim, he met the eye of each person in the room. In their own way, each was

a warrior for their Crusade. Instead of battling to Jerusalem, this Crusade was fighting on the ramparts of the Tower of London.

"Agreed," replied Minerva dryly, "But for more practical and immediate purposes, what do we do?"

The support that shone from Alice's wet face bolstered Harry's spirits more than he knew. He hadn't told them of Voldemort's exultation in the success of the ritual. The Dark Lord's thoughts were unclear, Harry's Occlumency worked against him in that matter, but the attitude were clear: malevolence. Whatever thoughts were running through the Dark Lord's mind, they weren't very kind.

"I'll inform Amelia," Alastor quietly announced. "I'll just tell her I can't reveal the source. She trusts me."

"What can she do?" Hermione whispered.

"Quite a bit, actually. So long as that pompous sack of shit Fudge doesn't get in the way. Or his blood purist lackey bint, Umbridge."

With real venom, Harry asked, "Is she a Death Eater?"

Shrugging, Alastor hedged, "I don't think so."

"Check her arm the next time you see her," Hermione directed. "That creepy eye of yours should be put to some good use," she finished with a smile.

"We need a plan," Harry announced. "We need a plan to pull Voldemort out so we can chop off his fucking head. It'll all be over then." Glancing to Alastor, he asked, "Did you pass the other information to Amelia?"

"Yeah. She damn near wet her knickers when she started to read it. Four days from now she's planning on a massive sweep up."

The information gleaned from their captured Death Eater had been extensive. Apparently, Walden Macnair had liked to brag in front of his Death Eaters. Alan Tigue had been a treasure trove of Death Eater meeting places, supply depots and member identities.

"Alastor," Minerva began. "Where is Snape? You've been leading the task force trying to find him."

"We still have no idea where that fucker Snape is, but now they'll be coming home soon."

When Alice furrowed her brow, Sirius answered the unspoken question for the old Auror. In an undertone of one who has accepted the inevitable pain and death to follow, Sirius told the room, "Voldemort wants to kill us all. He and Snape will be here soon enough."

.oOo.

Harry sat in Cynnes Gardd, enjoying the magically warm weather while a heavy rainstorm pelted the surrounding landscape with cold rain and sleet. He was confused, conflicted, scared and angry.

Confusion was simple to identify. He had no fucking clue what Voldemort was up to and there were no paths immediately presenting themselves so that he could investigate or uncover the truth. "God, I wish I had a 'Dumbledore Chocolate Frog card' for this one," he groused under his breath.

Deciding he could do nothing but be patient and trust Mad-Eye's plan of co-opting the DMLE to do the legwork for them, Harry ruthlessly shoved his confusion aside. Resolving to deal with the situation as the facts became clearer, he moved on to his internal conflict.

Ever since Harry had awakened from his unwanted vision, a disturbing idea had been rattling around in his brainpan. None of the Family was students of Tom Riddle A.K.A. Lord Voldemort. They couldn't put themselves in his shoes in an attempt to project his behaviours, thoughts or intentions. The foremost person in the world who could claim to truly know T.M. Riddle was a man that none of them trusted. He was a man of immense magical strength and true genius who also had a will of steel to match his capabilities.

Harry was conflicted because he wanted to bring Albus Dumbledore into his confidences.

Not about the time travel, nor their clandestine activities as the Fiendfyre Vigilantes; no that level of disclosure, that course of action, would be unwise. The vision of Voldemort gaining an homunculus form, their beliefs that the wizard was very close to regaining human form was urging Harry to consult with the ancient wizard. 'The only one that the Dark Lord ever feared' was a mighty title indeed, yet Voldemort hadn't feared Dumbledore only for his magical and martial might. He had feared his old Transfiguration professor for his mind as well.

"Fuckity-fuck-fuck-fuck!" he sang in a sarcastic voice. Running his hands through his extraordinarily unruly hair, The Boy-Who-Lived cast about for the metaphorical path to tread.

"Language, dearest."

Smiling affectionately, Harry slowly turned to see his wife standing behind him, her hands on her hips with a mock scowl on her face. The scowl shortly melted to an affectionate smile as she slid into place next to him. Soundly kissing him, she asked, "What's the bother?"

After a frustrated sigh, he told her, "I have this recurring, nagging and very unwelcome hunch that we should bring Dumbledore into the whole 'Voldemort is coming back' thing."

Curling her left arm about his right, she leaned on him as she chewed her lip and thought. Recognizing the symptoms of very deep cogitation and consideration from his wife, Harry let her be while he moved on to his fear.

The assault on the Macnair house wards had left Hermione magically drained. Their plan had accounted for that occurrence, so she was exposed for less than four seconds before the portkey had whisked her home. His intellectual understanding of her safety had allowed Harry to function in the melee that followed. However, her unknown status afterwards had nearly driven him mad.

His fear of losing her again was mounting.

He knew that they were both placing their lives at risk every time they geared up for a raid. He, also, knew that she was a more than competent warrior who could pummel to dust over ninety five

percent of Voldemort's minions. He knew these things, yet his terror of losing her had only grown since returning to the past. Returning to her. It was the only reason he came back. Sure, saving the world was a good and noble cause, but he was back to save the one that he loved. He was back to save her.

Losing her again would destroy him utterly.

This led to his anger. It was summed up in one word: Voldemort. The stupid prick just wouldn't stay dead. He'd lost back in '81, yet he wouldn't give up. Snorting in derision, Harry could somewhat empathise with his nemesis. Harry had lost it all in the late '00s, but he came back because he wouldn't give up.

Fuck you, Tom, Harry snarled to himself.

"I don't like it," Hermione opined.

Shaking his head to pick up the thread, he realized she was probably talking about bringing Dumbledore into the problem. "Why not?" he asked.

"Because he'll try to take over instead of being an expert advisor."

"Yet, he's the only true Voldemort expert that's out there. We don't have time to do all the research necessary to come up to speed," he countered.

"He would endanger everything we've worked, fought and bled to accomplish. His arrogant holier than thou attitude would be so counterproductive as to completely overshadow any contributions he might be able to make," she declared with an arrow shot to the heart that would have made Artemis proud. "I thought you hated him?" Hermione challenged.

"Hate is a very strong word," Harry sighed. "I dislike his machinations very strongly, but I don't hate him." After a long pause, he regarded his wife, "And you?"

"Me what?" she countered.

Her evasive ploy was obvious even to Harry, "Do you hate Albus?"

There was barely a heartbeat before she spat, "He hurt you. Systematically, deliberately and thoroughly hurt you. What would you do or feel about someone who did that to me?"

Harry stiffened in a momentarily silent rage. The magic pouring off him suspended the wards that kept Cynnes Gardd warm and dry, allowing a few raindrops to wet their hair. Closing his eyes, he regained control of himself causing the artificial good weather to return.

"I'd kill them all, which, I guess, is answer enough." After a brief consideration, he asked, "Deliberately? You believe Dumbledore maliciously set out to have me hurt by the Dursleys and later Voldemort?"

Her scowl crumpled into a mask of confusion. "I don't know about deliberately," she admitted in a low tone. "But it was either deliberate, or he's the most oblivious, arrogant, unfeeling bastard to ever lift a wand."

Slowly, he reached over to her, covering her hand with his own. "He can't hurt me anymore. No one can hurt me like that ever again."

Sighing, she absently nodded.

Without words, they intertwined their bodies; curling up on the bench. "I don't have a very objective perspective on Albus," he admitted.

"Me either," she agreed.

They exchanged a humorous look. "Talk to Moony?" they both asked simultaneously before laughing. Standing, Harry scooped his wife to her feet before bracing himself to leave the pleasant Cynnes Gardd.

.oOo.

Remus stroked his chin as he leaned back in his chair. The Potters had found the erstwhile academic in the library surrounded by a pile of books. Remus was dressed in an old tweed jacket, tan trousers and a white button down shirt. The only thing that was missing from his 'professor ensemble' was a pipe stuffed full of Captain Black.

"Distancing him from us would be best. If we could hold him at bay, he can't interfere with our activities. In the end, though, I believe you're right. Albus is the most knowledgeable person about Voldemort of whom I'm aware. It would be...awkward...for you to directly talk to Albus." Remus began to pace as he thought aloud.

Harry snorted at the obviousness of the statement. Hermione absently smacked him on the shoulder before asking, "What about Minerva?"

"Hmm, that's an interesting idea. Sirius is out, as am I. Dora is a non-entity as far as Albus is concerned. In fact, her addressing Albus would cause more problems than we hope to solve. He'd want to know how she got involved and it would degrade from there."

Tapping his fingers on the back of his chair as he leaned on it, Remus thought through the options. He met Hermione's eye before he prompted the time traveling witch, "You do realize there will be repercussions if Minerva were to discuss this with Albus."

"Her status as a trusted part of our Family would be known to the old man," Hermione replied without missing a beat.

"Alastor?" Harry mused. Before the other two could reply, he dismissed the idea, "He'd be a bigger cipher than Dora. Dumbledore would be rabid to find out how his old friend became involved with us. At least Minerva has a pre-existing connexion to us."

"We'll need to ask her if she's alright with this. It's her life that he would make miserable," Hermione observed.

The conversation dwindled into gossip from there. Harry began teasing Remus about his intentions for Dora.

"So when are you going to make my cousin an honest woman, Remus?"

"Not you too," Remus muttered as he stood. "I'm off to get a snack. You'll contact Minerva?" he asked.

Hermione nodded as she leaned on Harry, who watched Moony leave. The Boy-Who-Lived in turn leaned back on the leather couch, allowing the couple to lounge a bit.

Things had been moving so fast lately, that Harry's head had been metaphorically spinning. He pulled Hermione closer as he sighed. "I've no idea what to do. I remember the plan: free Sirius, kill Voldemort, tell the rest to bugger off. It's just the how that's bollixed up right now."

She was twirling a lock of his hair absently when she told him, "Whenever I get lost, I remember the beginning."

Smiling, Harry teased, "I assume you're being smart now." Completely distracted from his earlier point, he squeezed her tightly.

With a serious expression, she sat up, straddling his lap. Gently grasping his cheeks, she looked deep in his eyes, "You are my Alpha and Omega. When things are confusing, desperate or difficult, I always return to you. Your little sojourn into the land of Nod reminded me that I can no longer be fully 'me' without you."

"As there is no me without you," he choked out.

Nodding, she gently kissed her man. Laying her forehead on his, she shut her eyes as she affirmed herself. "I love you. I want you. I am you as you are me. You're my best friend, my love and my lover. I never want to be parted from you or part from you in turn." Pulling back a bit so they could focus on each other, she finished, "I love you."

A flick of his wrist allowed Harry to lock the door and Silence the room. Slowly, tenderly and deliberately he made love to his wife in the deepening shadows of a late winter day. With heart, mind and body they renewed their vows of love.

.oOo.

Fortunately, the following weekend was a Hogsmeade weekend, so Minerva had a valid excuse for a lunchtime rendezvous with the Glamoured Potters. No one blinked when the Deputy Head sat down to lunch with a middle-aged couple.

"How are you, Minerva?" Harry asked.

Cocking an eyebrow, the severe looking professor glared at the male member of her party before snapping open her menu, "I'm annoyed. You?"

"Oh, I'm grand," Harry replied absently. When the waiter had taken their order and departed, Hermione surreptitiously raised a Privacy ward.

"Now what?" Minerva muttered when she saw Hermione finish the hastily raised ward.

"Joking aside, what's bothering you?" Harry pressed.

Sipping her tea, Minerva sighed through her nose. "I become more intolerant of Albus and his ways as the days go by. I have to bite my tongue or leave the room before I lash out at him. I've already had two shouting matches with him this year, which is two more than I've had in all the years before."

Sagging into her seat, she whispered, "I may end up leaving Hogwarts. This is driving me mad."

Frowning, Hermione reached across the table, taking Minerva's hand in her own. "What is so intolerable?"

"It's the duplicity, the...the lies!" she hissed acidly. "He has a few faces; the doddering eccentric grandfather and the powerful light wizard are the two most prominent. Both hide what he did to you," she nodded to Harry. "What he did to so many. Sirius suffered so much but Albus could have done right by him with a few offhand remarks. A dozen years in Azkaban because Albus chose..." she trailed off in disgusted disillusionment.

"To do what was easy as opposed to what was right," Harry finished for her.

"Yes."

They were all quiet as they contemplated Minerva's revelation. Finally, she broke the silence, "This is the first time I've said it aloud, so I've no idea what I'm to do, but I needed to say it."

The waiter brought their food and drink. Harry paid the man before he left. A hefty tip ensured the man would give them their privacy.

There was no talk as the group dug into their meals. The Golden Cauldron was an excellent restaurant that catered to the adult wizarding world. On rare occasions, seventh year students might come in on a date, but usually the prices and atmosphere kept the students away.

Sporadic small talk popped up and wilted away through the meal; school gossip was a big topic. Apparently, the Slytherins had come to heel with the removal of their protective head of house combined with the 'disappearance' of many of the most vocal blood purists in society. In a backwards way, their activities as the Fiendfyre Vigilantes were already paying dividends.

As they sipped their after meal tea, Harry began, "Minerva, we've a problem. With Voldemort on the march, we're at a loss regarding planning. Talking with Remus and Sirius, as well as, Steven and Alice, we all agree that we need to consult with Albus about the problem."

A cocked eyebrow was the Transfiguration Mistress' only reply.

"Let's be a little clearer," Hermione interjected. "We all reluctantly agree that we ought to consult with Albus."

"That's more believable," Minerva muttered. After another fortifying sip of her tea, she asked, "I assume that you would like me to be your intermediary?"

Hermione took the lead. "Only if you're willing. It will reveal to Albus that your role in Harry's life is much more than just a former school time head of house. He may make your life more difficult."

Waving away The Smartest Witch of the Age, Minerva declared, "He has to be aware of that already. My own behaviour has been out of the ordinary this year and it all revolves around you," she admitted with a small nod to Harry.

"Thank you," Harry told her in an undertone.

With real emotion in her eyes, Minerva reached across the table, taking the Potters' hands in her own. "As I told you in September, I could do no less for my own children."

.oOo.

"That was bloody brilliant!" Steven exclaimed as he and Sirius Apparated into the entry hall. Harry and Remus arrived a second later.

"Who's the best Quidditch team in Britain?" Sirius asked. His tone was light with the undercurrents of an expected answer.

"Puddlemere United, sahib," Harry joked.

In the drawing room, Hermione caught her mother's attention so she could have an audience as she rolled her eyes. The men had been at the Puddlemere vs. Tutshill match for the last twelve hours.

As the gabble of voices moved toward the drawing room, Hermione set her book aside and steeled herself to at least one hour of nonstop Quidditch talk.

"Jones was totally blatching!"

"Bugger off, he was not!"

"You're both out!"

Deciding that silence was the best course of action for her at this time, Hermione grabbed her book to begin reading again.

"Hey love!" an exuberant Harry shouted when he came in the room. Bouncing over to her, he placed a smacking kiss on her before flopping on the couch. "Whatcha reading?"

Rolling her eyes, she showed him the cover of Transfiguration Mastery.

"Is it any good?"

"Actually, it's fantastic."

"Huh. I'm too wound up to read. Want to go for a walk?"

Glancing at the clock, she drolly countered, "Harry, it's ten in the evening."

Wagging his eyebrows, he teased, "We won't walk far."

Giving him a playful shove, she stood. "Goodnight, Harry."

From the entry hall a loud crack of Apparition sounded.

All conversation ceased as the witches and wizards drew their wands. As a unit, they turned to face the door. Harry and Hermione silently slid in front of Alice and Steven.

Clacketty-clack sounded the shoes of the person striding down the marble hall. The person was walking at a fast pace if the staccato tattoo of the heels was any indication.

Minerva McGonagall rounded into the drawing room, her face pale with anger. Dismissing the drawn wands of the Family, she headed for the wet bar in the corner of the room.

"We keep this up, we'll turn Minerva into a drunk," Sirius quipped.

As he settled on the settee, Remus poured tea for everyone before he asked, "Did your discussion with Albus go poorly?"

"Actually, it went far better than I expected," she replied through gritted teeth.

Frowning, Harry asked, "Then why..." he trailed off as he gestured to the glass of whisky in his mother figure's hand.

"Because I'm sick and bloody tired of his sanctimonious condescension."

"Ah."

The room was quiet for a full minute as the rest of the family settled down, all thoughts of the Quidditch match forgotten.

"I met with him earlier tonight, after dinner. After explaining the substance of your dream, he first asked me why I was delivering the news."

Sirius rolled his eyes at Dumbledore's machinations before he snorted in annoyance.

"Yes, quite," Minerva acknowledged before continuing. "I told him that Harry didn't trust him and as such, had asked me to approach him with the news. He nodded, a sad expression on his face. It was as if he'd done nothing wrong and was put upon."

She clenched her jaw as she shut her eyes in an attempt to rein in her emotions. Most people thought that Minerva McGonagall was an emotionless person. The truth was that she was one of the most passionate persons most would ever meet. She loved, cared and hated with a fiery exuberance that could be overwhelming. Her usually impassive mien had been cultivated by endless self-discipline. For it to be slipping was shocking to those who had known her for years.

"He asked a series of questions. For some I had answers, others I did not." Withdrawing a small parchment from her pocket, she tossed it on the coffee table in front of Harry. "When you have time, would you see if you could answer any of his questions?"

Harry nodded before Minerva finished. "He didn't insist, but he very much desires you to come to the school. He'd like to examine your memory in his pensieve to see if he can pick up any details you missed." She scowled again, "He, very reluctantly, acknowledged that Severus could have accomplished the ritual you described."

"Astounding," Sirius commented dryly.

There was a watchful silence as Harry leaned back on the sofa. Absently pulling Hermione to him, he pondered the situation. "To go or not to go. That is the question," he mused aloud.

Remus cleared his throat, grabbing everyone's attention and derailing the conversation. "I've been doing a lot of thinking about Albus in the past few months. I admit that I don't have an unbiased opinion of the man as he's helped me in ways that no one in wizarding Britain ever had or could."

Everyone nodded, acknowledging that the old wizard had given Remus an incredible gift by allowing him to attend Hogwarts despite his Lycanthropy.

Staring into his cup of tea, Remus told them, "Albus has made innumerable mistakes. Deadly mistakes. I am fairly certain that Benjy Fenwick and the Prewitt brothers are dead because of mistakes by Albus. Sirius' imprisonment and Harry's incarceration with the Dursley's are actions for which he is also responsible. I don't want to debate whether he intentionally set you two up to be hurt or not. I don't think we'll ever know for sure, but the point remains that Albus is culpable.

"I also don't think he's been malicious. I don't believe that he's set out to hurt a person; that's much more in line with Voldemort than Albus. Given Albus' position and the importance that we give him, his mistakes are magnified to the point where he shatters lives when he makes a mistake that would merely require an apology when the rest of us make a similar mistake."

"Hold on," Sirius interrupted hotly. "What the bloody hell do you mean, we give him importance"

Shrugging, Remus explained, "Look, he's the Headmaster of Hogwarts and the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot." Turning to Steven, he asked, "Who is the current Head of your secondary school and who's the Leader of the House of Commons?"

Taken aback, Steven thought for a minute before sheepishly replying, "I've no idea on either counts."

"That's my point," Remus explained. "Albus is a hero for what he did in the Grindlewald conflict and in the first Blood War with Voldemort. But in the end, he's only the Head teacher with an important role in government. True, he's inserted himself in situations which are none of his business," he indicated to Harry with a wave of his hand. "He had no business interfering with Harry's guardianship."

With a sigh, Hermione summed up, "He's an old man who's done great things and we look to him to not only continue to save the world, but to solve all our problems."

The quiet was so complete, Harry heard the waves crashing on the beach.

"He's not the devil. He's not responsible for all our ills either."

Stunned, the rest of the party looked at Sirius, who'd just spoken.

"What? Just because I joke a lot doesn't mean I'm stupid."

"But, he put you in Azkaban..." Harry began, but stopped at his godfather's head shake.

"No, Midnight. Barty Crouch put me in Azkaban without a trial. Albus' mistake," he nodded toward Remus, "Was to not make a fuss about it in the paper. No one else did, though, either. Not Bagnold. Not Fudge. Not Remus. Not Minerva. Not anyone."

The others flinched, but Sirius went on, "I've come to the point where I have to forgive any and all for that or I'll go mad. I'm past it." Turning to Harry, the former Prisoner of Azkaban declared, "But for what Albus did to you, I don't forgive."

"Wait, are you implying that we've been using Dumbledore as a scapegoat for what's wrong?" Alice asked with a hint of disbelief in her tone.

In a calm, almost disinterested tone, Remus rejoined, "To an extent, yes."

He let the thought sink in before adding, "I do believe that Albus has made some rather enormous and even monstrous errors in judgement. Benjy, the Prewitts, Harry and Sirius are just the tip of the iceberg. Hiding the Philosopher's stone in the school, while knowing that Voldemort was pursuing it during the first year of The Boy-Who-Lived is borderline insane. If I'd known about the Chamber of Secrets situation where students were being petrified and he insisted upon keeping the school open, I believe I would have camped out in Albus' office the night of a full moon. Be that as it may..."

The group snickered at the visual of Remus in a pup tent changing to Moony amidst the devices, books and portraits of the Head's office at Hogwarts.

"The point is that I don't believe Albus to be evil. He's extremely human but some of the impact of his mistakes falls in our own lap. At the same time, his arrogance and reluctance to confide in others, much less heed their advice or input is a large defect in his own character."

Chiming in, Hermione observed, "In the end, Voldemort is responsible for much of the evil we face. Many contributed to the fall of Tom Riddle, but in the end, Tom Marvolo Riddle made his choices and fell into darkness of his own accord. Any and all acts perpetrated by Voldemort and the Death Eaters are the responsibility of those people."

Nodding, Remus agreed, "Yes."

With a hard expression, Hermione zeroed in on Remus, "So, too, is Albus. He put Harry with the Dursley's despite Minerva's protests. He made many choices where he hurt people. Great responsibility is within his grasp, he knows this and yet he repeatedly failed. Allowing Snape full reign to terrorize the school, hiding the Stone in the castle, letting the students stay at school despite the Chamber, Sirius's imprisonment, the corruption in the Wizengamot, Fudge's excesses...the list goes on for quite a while. Albus has failed far more than he's succeeded."

Nodding again, Remus concurred, "It's not an easy matter. The situation is hardly black and white by any means. The pain he's visited upon others is significant."

Standing, Harry announced, "I need a run. I've got to think about all this." Turning to the Scot, he told her, "Thank you for talking to him. I appreciate it."

The noticeably subdued woman nodded her head, acknowledging his thanks.

Turning to his wife, Harry asked, "You want to come with?"

Standing, she silently changed to Longtooth before padding to the front door, the black jaguar on her heels. Dobby appeared just in time to open the door to the night, allowing the great predators to run.

When the youngest members of the Family had left, Sirius asked all in the room a speculative question, "I wonder if we get so mad at Albus for what he's done, for what we've done or a bit of both?"

.oOo.

They sat in their hot springs, naked, silent and overwhelmed. Hermione was directly across from her husband, watching him as he lay back against the marble sides they'd conjured weeks ago. Harry had his eyes closed as he tried to meditate on the issue at hand.

"It's not about whether Albus is the big bad," she'd counselled her husband. "The question at hand is whether or not to approach him for advice and insight."

"Yeah. All things considered, though, I'd rather tell him to fong off." Sighing he slid around to Hermione's side of the springs. Pulling her into his lap, he nuzzled her damp hair. She mischievously wiggled in his lap, causing him to smile. As his hands wandered, he asked, "What do you think?"

"I think that I'm aghast that you want to talk about a one hundred and fifty year old wizard while your naked, wet wife is wiggling on your lap."

His smile blossomed to laughter. After languidly kissing her, he sighed, "You're right. Thinking is overrated." Cocking his head to one side, he asked, "Are you trying to distract me with your wet, naked body?"

"Is it working?"

"Yes."

"Well, then. Yes I am."

.oOo.

Mad-Eye tromped down the hall of Rowan Hill scowling at all and sundry. So intimidating was his glare, most of the portraits fled from him. As he stalked into the Master's study, Harry called out, "Hello, Alastor. Why are you stomping about like a four year old?"

"What the bloody hell did you do to Albus?"

Looking up from the monthly accounts of the estate, Harry frowned.
"I just made an appointment to see him."

Rolling his good eye, the old Auror barked, "I know that you moron. I mean, what else did you do?"

Ignoring the insult, Harry replied, "Nothing."

"Then why is he almost literally breaking down my door to have me investigate you?"

"Cause he's a controlling, manipulative git?"

Mad-Eye wasn't amused.

"Fuck if I know," Harry admitted. When Alastor continued to glare, Harry raised his hands in a surrendering motion, "I really don't know!"

Hermione spoke up from the couch where she was reading, "Alastor, you know how Albus can't handle not knowing what's going on. He's completely in receive mode here and he must hate it. He's just trying to find out what the what is." Turning the page of her book, her disinterest in the topic made clear the amount of energy she was willing to expend on the topic of Albus Dumbledore and his foibles.

Grunting, Mad-Eye pulled out his flask, knocking back a slug.

Feeling bold, Harry asked, "You know, I've always wondered what you have in that flask."

"Keep wondering. It's good for your complexion."

Rolling his eyes, Harry pressed, "Come on, Alastor. Is it whiskey?"

"Fuck you."

"Alastor, language," Hermione reproved without looking up from her book while reading on the couch.

The old man surreptitiously flipped Hermione the bird. Meanwhile, Harry had slipped out of his seat before slinking over to the distracted Auror. Unfortunately, Harry had forgotten the first rule of Mad-Eye. Never, ever, sneak up on the most paranoid man in the Northern Hemisphere.

When Harry leaned in to sniff at the open flask, he startled the old man. Whirling about, Mad-Eye began hurling hexes and curses in random directions. The fireplace became a duck, the desk burst into flame, the doors to the study began singing a version of My Favourite Things from The Sound of Music, while the andirons in the other fireplace became mice, which immediately perished from the flames.

"Mad-Eye, you stupid bastard! Stop it!" Harry had dived to the side, rolling behind a bookcase.

Growling, the old man stalked from the room in the general direction of the kitchens.

"He's mad..." Harry groaned as he stood. After a small pause, he muttered, "Of course he is. It's Alastor."

Hermione hadn't moved during the entire exchange. While Harry was flopping about the room, she'd calmly drawn her wand, cast the Advanced Shield Spell and waited for Mad-Eye's fit to pass. Since she already had wand out, Hermione casually began reversing Mad-Eye's spells. She cancelled everything except the singing door. It had finished My Favourite Things and had moved into a rousing rendition of The Lonely Goatherd. Raising his eyebrows, Harry turned to his wife.

Shrugging, she picked up her book, "It's doing a good job and I've always loved The Sound of Music."

"At least it isn't dancing," Harry muttered as he moved back to his desk.

After resettling, she asked, "So?"

"So what?"

"What was in the flask?"

"I dunno. It wasn't alcohol, that's for sure. I recognize the scent but can't place it. It makes me think of Uncle Vernon's mother."

Hermione silently furrowed her brows in a silent query.

Nodding, he answered, "Yeah, she's as unpleasant as he was. She had this bowel problem which made her cranky..." The stunned expression of realization on The Boy-Who-Lived quickly dissolved into raucous laughter.

His howls of amusement caused his wife to shift from querying to annoyed. Between laughs, he squeaked out, "Prune juice. He's drinking prune juice..."

Hermione's giggles complemented Harry's mirth for the next ten minutes.

.oOo.

She watched him from the path. It was after dinner when he'd excused himself to head out of doors. His expression told her all she needed to know to figure out his destination. She'd followed him the first time he'd gone. Something told her that he'd need her, so she followed.

The same hunch prodded her again this evening. Padding along as Longtooth, she followed her husband as he wound through the trees. When he opened the creaking iron gate, she slowed. Shifting back to her human form, she watched him kneel at the foot of his parents' graves.

"Hi mum, dad." He picked up a few scattered leaves from overtop James' and Lily's graves before sitting on his haunches. "I'm going to see Dumbledore tomorrow and I'm not too sure about how to feel."

Grabbing a stick, he began to peel the bark off as he mused. "I mean, a big part of me wants to punch him on the nose. He put me there and could have easily arranged for a trial for Sirius. That's enough to put him in the 'unthinking bastard' column. At the same time, I really think we'll need him if we're going to stop Voldemort."

Rubbing the now bare stick between his palms, he was silent for a bit. "Sirius and Remus are great. So too are Alice and Steven, but I really wish you were here. I need some advice from my parents."

A great heaving sigh from Harry pulled Hermione forward. Sliding through the open gate, she moved to his side. She gently placed her small hand on his shoulder before sitting next to him. Extending her arm, she wrapped it around her husband, pulling him close.

"I love you, Hermione."

"And I you."

Turning to her, his eyes were alight with love and devotion. "I'm going to give you the life you deserve. We're going to live here for the next seventy years, raising our children, hosting the Family and just loving each other. I'll buy you every book in the country, expanding the library to fit them all. I'll feed you bon bons when you're pregnant with our children and run with you and the kids as we play in the garden. I'll love you forever."

She knew he was promising the future that his parents had been unable to realize. Promising all that James and Lily had been denied because of a psychopathic lunatic with a delusion of grandeur.

A single tear fell from her eye as she raised her hand to his cheek, "I'm so very lucky to have you, Harry."

"No, we're lucky to have each other."

Nodding, she leaned in kiss to her man ever so gently.

"Come on, you need your rest. We've a big day tomorrow."

.oOo.

The fireplace in Minerva McGonagall's quarters flared green before disgorging four people. Remus, Sirius and Hermione stood, brushing the ash and soot from Harry. As usual, Harry had tumbled out of the fireplace with a distinct lack of grace. Floo travel seemed to be the antithesis of his agility on a broom.

When they were all clean, the five members of the Family headed to the Headmaster's office.

Minerva's face was its usual impassive mien of professional detachment. Only those closest to her would have been able to notice the hints of distress and worry she bore for the upcoming meeting. Remus' observations the other day about Albus had shaken her. From the extreme of being an Albus Dumbledore supplicant to hating him, she'd experienced severe emotional whiplash in the last few months. Now she was coming to a middle ground where she disliked the man and didn't trust him, but didn't hate him as she had.

Sirius wore a mask of jocularly as he rattled off stories of the Marauders exploits for Harry's amusement. Remus was silent at Padfoot's side, occasionally offering a brief smile in remembrance of one of his old friend's anecdotes. Both Marauders were concerned that the upcoming meeting would hurt Harry. As he'd already demonstrated, Albus had the authority and influence that allowed him to disturb Harry's life most severely. Neither man had any concern for themselves, only the son of Prongs.

Hermione stood tall next to her man. She held his hand as they strode through the empty halls of the school. They'd timed their arrival so that classes were being conducted and the bulk of the students in the classrooms. After their emotional moment in the family graveyard the evening before, Hermione had been tempted to beg Harry to run away with her. Tahiti, the Seychelles, Bora Bora, Alaska, Tasmania, anywhere they could hide from Voldemort to leave all the mess behind.

Her Gryffindor pride and spirit rebelled, though. Even though her fear shrieked in her ears that they should flee, neither Hermione nor Harry would run. They'd run once when the world had been savaged. Never again.

The evening before, she had fallen asleep in the arms of the man she loved. Even though he wasn't quite fourteen, Harry was more a man than any other male she'd met. The forthcoming meeting really held no apprehension for her. Deep in herself she knew that Harry could handle anything so long as he had his family. The meeting was a stepping-stone to the final solution of the problem that was

personified in the person who had named himself Lord Voldemort. She trusted Harry, herself and their Family; they would prevail.

Harry was slightly apprehensive, but not fearful. The time for debate and consideration was past. The time for action was present and Harry Potter excelled at action like no other.

They stopped in front of the guardian statue of the Headmaster's doorway. Without rehearsal, they all met the other's gaze, reaffirming their commitment to each other, to their purpose.

"Acid Pops."

.oOo.

"Ah, welcome everyone," the aged Headmaster greeted the group with a smile as he rose from behind his desk. It was times like this when Harry had a split second of doubt. How could he ever think that this genial old man could be so duplicitous or conniving? Unbidden, the nightmare of Hermione's sightless eyes as he held her corpse rose before his vision. He could feel the remembered rain on his face as the memory of the seeping cold from the mud in the ditch chilled his legs.

Blinking away the recollection, Harry admitted to himself that he knew quite well why he needed to be on his guard. There was far too much at stake to fail.

"Professor," Hermione replied to the man's greeting. Steeling himself, Harry concentrated on staying in the present. Dumbledore was a wily man who would take advantage of any opening offered. He'd do his best to avoid offering any fissures in his behaviour.

The group moved to the sitting area in the oversized office. An elf popped in with a tea service and snacks before silently withdrawing. The practiced host, Dumbledore poured for everyone while keeping up a light chatter about current events.

As they all settled into their seats, Harry decided to seize control of the situation by speaking first. "Professor, as Professor McGonagall has related to you, I had a happening of the most disturbing kind recently."

Beetling his brows, Dumbledore replaced his cup on the saucer before replying, "Yes, she did. Would you mind relating the substance of the dream?"

Suppressing a shudder of horror, Harry demurred, "Actually Professor, I'd like to forget that it ever happened. I would much prefer to offer you a memory of the...scene that you can watch in your pensieve."

Dumbledore didn't move for a long moment before he asked, "How did you know I have a pensieve, Harry?"

With the hint of a glare, Harry snapped, "Professor McGonagall mentioned it to me when she related the discussion the two of you had. Would you like the memory or not, sir?" He was outwardly passive, but inwardly seething. Why is he chasing this goddam hare when we're talking about the resurrection of Voldemort?

"Yes, of course. Let me fetch it." The old man stood before striding to the cabinet on the interior wall of his office. Returning with the large stone bowl, Albus placed it on the low table around which they were seated.

"You just need to take your wand..." Dumbledore began before trailing off as Harry had already withdrawn the memory from his temple.

Dropping the silvery substance in the bowl, The Boy-Who-Lived mentioned, "I read a book on pensieves; very interesting devices."

"Would any of you care to accompany me?" Dumbledore offered before immersing himself in the memory.

Silently, the rest of the Family nodded. As one, they all reached for the shimmering memory, dipping their index finger into the fluid. Harry watched them all flow into the bowl, but declined to look into the bowl itself. He didn't want to see the poor mother slaughtered again, nor the little boy who was tortured as his body was consumed and transformed. The mere thought of watching it again made him ill.

He closed his eyes in an attempt to meditate for a bit, hoping to regain his emotional equilibrium. Breathing deeply, he reached out with his senses while releasing the tension, anger, fear and

aggression that clouded his mind. Off to his right, he felt a soothing presence that could only be one thing.

Opening his eyes, he smiled at Fawkes who was watching him. "Lo Fawkes. Hope you're well," Harry greeted in an undertone. A soft trill was the only reply from the immortal creature of light. His spirits unaccountably lifted, Harry resumed his meditation.

Ten minutes later, he heard his companions begin to stir. Opening his eyes, he saw that they were all pale. Sirius held his head in his hands while Remus was struggling to control his breathing. Hermione had soundless tears tracking down her face while Minerva had a hand clamped over her mouth as if to force down the overwhelming emotion.

Turning to the Vanquisher of Grindlewald, Harry was shocked at his appearance. He'd never seen Albus Dumbledore appear so old. His expression haggard, the Headmaster was staring blindly out the window.

Gently breaking the silence with hopes of getting the meeting on track, Harry mentioned, "It's rather unpleasant."

"It was disgusting and an abomination. True evil walks again. They should all be executed." The minor Earl of Richmond was stunned that Dumbledore made such a vicious condemnation with such heat.

"No second chances for old Severus?" Sirius sardonically observed.

Dumbledore was silent for a long moment where he seemed to fold in on himself. Softly, the old man answered, "No. No second chances. He's beyond human redemption."

The group was silent as they all digested the old man's pronouncement. Finally, Dumbledore sighed, "I shall grieve later. For now, we have a problem."

Remus snorted at the understatement. "Yes, quite. None of us are experts in Necromancy, so we hoped that you would either be aware of the process that he's trying to use for his resurrection or knew of someone with the expertise."

Leaning back in his chair, Dumbledore stroked his beard while deep in thought. Finally, he admitted, "I am unaware of the process Tom is using for his resurrection, though I admit that I only have a passing acquaintance with Necromancy. I know of a few people who are better versed. I shall contact them for their opinion."

Internally rolling her eyes at the old man's dissimulation, Hermione asked, "And who would those persons be, sir?"

When Dumbledore hesitated, Sirius pounced. "Albus, let's get something straight. You're not in charge here. You'll be up front and honest with us or this is the last time we see each other. That division will probably allow Voldemort to win in the end. We all know the prophecy," all eyes swivelled to the impassive Harry, "So get over yourself; you can't win. Only Harry can. You need us far more than we need you."

The Family had talked beforehand where Sirius had insisted upon being the antagonist to the Headmaster for the Family. "After the New Year's party at the Longbottom's, he's well aware that I don't think too highly of him. No need to tip our hand any further."

Harry later told Hermione that he thought old Padfoot was secretly looking forward to yelling at the old wizard. It looked like Sirius was getting his wish.

"You are at the top of a list of very exclusive people, Albus," Sirius coldly told the quiescent old man. "You are near the top of people I hate with a red hot passion." Dumbledore's face reflected shock before he reassumed his impassive expression. "Don't fuck with us or you'll regret it."

Harry internally flinched at Sirius' threat. Dumbledore had stared down Voldemort, Grindlewald and probably much more. A threat from Sirius Black had to be nearly laughable in that context. Harry was surprised that the Headmaster didn't either chuckle or yawn in response to Sirius' threats.

"I'm very sorry that you feel that way toward me, Sirius. If we could, later we might meet so that you could air your grievances against me."

"Returning to the point at hand," Minerva interrupted. "Harry has related the substance of this vision to Amelia Bones at the DMLE but neither she nor we have the insight into Tom Riddle that you do, Albus. We'd like your estimation of his purpose and next moves."

Snorting to himself, Albus countered, "His purpose is restoration to a physical body, Minerva and world domination from there. But you already know that..." he steepled his fingers as he ordered his thoughts.

"He'll want to establish a safe place where he and his immediate supporters can reside. He's vulnerable in this form. Tom Riddle despises all weakness, so I expect him to attempt to accelerate the next stage or stages required for his restoration to a body." Tapping his long forefinger on the side of his crooked nose, Albus mused, "Where? Where would he go? Britain? Abroad? Family? Hmmm..."

Shaking his head to clear the extraneous thoughts, he decided, "We can discuss the 'where' later as that will most likely be tied to his method for revival. So, he'll look for a safe house followed by restoration to his body. His impatience combined with his massive ego won't allow him to maintain this ineffectual and humiliating form for long.

"Based on what Minerva related regarding the emotions you could sense from him," the old man fixed his thoughtful expression on Harry, "I doubt he will tolerate any dissent from his followers. He's waited a long twelve years for this resurrection. Tom Riddle won't allow for any unnecessary delay."

Staring off to the distance, he elaborated, "The man's genius was unbounded. No topic was un-mastered. I'm sure if he so chose, he could obtain masteries in all our core courses with no revision beforehand. I do not expect him to go the easy route. He will want to maximize the event. I expect not only a resurrection, but a manoeuvring of events so that he can strike a blow to his enemies."

Fixing his gaze on Harry again, he counselled, "You must be vigilant, Harry. You and I are his prime targets. He will come for us first."

Harry nodded seriously. "As you must be as well, Headmaster. You are a beacon of hope to Britain."

A gracious nod of his head preceded his summation. "He will attempt to strike a blow while maintaining his anonymity. These Fiendfyre Vigilantes have severely decimated Tom's pre-existing supporters. He will need time to amass support both financial and manpower. Alone he is a dangerous wizard. With support, he is the leader of his revolution."

Gesturing with his hand, Dumbledore asked, "May I keep this memory, Harry? I'm sure that my Necromantic experts will want to watch the...proceedings," he finished with evident distaste.

Harry nodded absently, deep in thought. Hermione asked, "Just a quick follow up, sir. Who will you be calling in to evaluate the Necromancy?"

With an amused grin, the old Headmaster replied, "I shall first contact Christian Duvail. He's a Frenchman who's the foremost Necromancer in Europe. If he is unavailable or ignorant as to Tom's designs, I shall ask Chit Sang of China followed by Xin Fu of Hong Kong. Both men owe me large favours and can be trusted to keep a secret."

"An Unbreakable Vow ensures their secrecy," Harry observed.

Dumbledore's raised eyebrows were all the expression of protest that was needed. "Let me rephrase," Harry began. "I will have to insist that you bind your consultants by using an Unbreakable Vow. My parents should have done so with Peter when they made him their secret keeper. I don't intend to repeat the mistakes of the past."

With a gentle nod of his head, Dumbledore acquiesced to Harry's 'request'.

A long break of silence settled over the group. Finally, Hermione glanced around the room in a silent poll. Turning to the old man, she announced, "Thank you for your time, Headmaster. We'll be in touch."

.oOo.

"So was that the most anti-climactic meeting you've ever been involved with or what?" Sirius asked the room when they got back to Rowan Hill.

"No kidding. I went in there for a battle and we got a semi-reasoned discourse with Albus. He only got stupid the one time."

"And you smacked him like a puppy," Hermione told her husband as she curled into his side.

Blushing slightly, Harry wrapped an arm about Hermione's shoulders. "Well..."

There was a pregnant pause before Sirius put voice to the question they were all pondering, "What now?"

"I have absolutely no idea," Harry replied.

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to all who reviewed the first eleven chapters. Story status, as always, can be found on my Author's page on FanFiction(dot)net.

2. Recommendation for the chapter is 'Twas the Day Before Christmas by apAidan. It's a fun little story about our heroes finally seeing what was plain to everyone else. Sorry about the confusion regarding last chapter's rec. Coming Back Late is by Paracelsus on Portkey, but the author's name on FanFiction dot net is alchymie.

3. The song Harry's singing in bed is "Thank You" by Led Zeppelin.

4. A reminder: I despise the plot device that is Horcruxes. I'll never use them in a story and they aren't involved in this story, either. Same goes for the so-called Deathly Hallows. Neat idea, but the way that JKR included them as a tacked on Deus Ex Machina in book 7 nearly made me heave. Repeatedly.

5. I've heard (and it may be rumour) that JKR pronounced Snape her most complex character. I couldn't disagree more. Severus Snape is a bully who didn't get the girl he lusted after because he was an asshole. Then he went and joined the club of 'let's pick on the people who are different' because she wouldn't love him even though he was an asshole. When his new 'friends' turned out to be much meaner than he expected, he ran crying to his old headmaster. Unrelenting guilt drove him to grudgingly aid the good guys.

Because he didn't get his way with the girl, he took it out on a generation of students; focusing on the son of the woman he 'loved'. What a putz.

Albus Dumbledore, on the other hand, is a study in contradiction. In this chapter, I just begin to plumb the depths of this character's twists and turns. I believe Albus is easily the most complex character in the entire Harry Potter series of books. Sure, the fics where Dumbles is evil are funny, but to be honest, he's an incredibly complex character, who, in the end, fails far more than he succeeds. But then again, don't we all?

Chapter 13

DMLE ARRESTS 47 IN WIDE AREA SWEEP

"Amelia did well," Sirius commented as he read parts of the paper to the Family while they ate their breakfast.

"Apparently some of the 'oldest of the Pureblood families'," he snorted in derision as he quoted, "Believe that this is a 'systematic attempt to destroy wizarding Britain by eliminating its leaders'."

Sirius was nearly growling as he wadded up the paper before throwing it into the fire. "Let's all conveniently forget that the forty seven people she arrested were the airtight cases for criminal behaviour. I'm sure there were another hundred or so for whom she had some evidence, just not enough for an airtight conviction." Standing, he stomped to the sideboard to plate up his breakfast.

Spinning about, he held up a serving spoon, pointing it at Harry. Obviously, he was just warming up his tirade, "Let's also forget that Amelia is a pureblood as well." Savagely digging into the porridge he snapped, "Morons." Mixing strawberries and the rest of the peaches into his gruel, he stomped back to the table.

Alice Granger sat back in her chair, her eyes unfocused. With a hint of mirth, Steven muttered, "Uh-oh, here it comes. Everyone run."

Alice's eyes focused again, only to narrow at her chuckling husband. "Do you prefer the couch, husband mine?"

"No dear."

"That's what I thought."

Smiling at the playful banter, Harry asked, "What's on your mind, Mum?"

Alice smiled brightly at Harry's calling her mum. They'd had a long talk when she'd pulled him into his study before politely telling Hermione, "Why don't you find somewhere else to be, Pumpkin. I need to have a talk with your husband."

As she settled on the couch, he threw another log on the fire. Stoking it to a crackling blaze, he joined her. "How can I help you, Mrs Granger?"

Absently, she took his hand, running her fingers over the small scars on the back. "How did you get these?" she asked in delay while she stoked the fires of her courage.

Surprised at the question, Harry replied without engaging the usual filter he imposed on his thoughts. "Gardening for Aunt Petunia. She likes roses but hates weeds, so I had to crawl into the bushes to pull the weeds in the middle."

Closing her eyes to hide away her upset, Alice murmured, "I assume she never treated your cuts or wounds in any way?"

Harry's shrug told her volumes. After a moment of quiet where she continued to hold his hand, she told him, "I've been thinking about this for a while now; ever since you and Hermione told us the truth about everything." She trailed off as she stared out the window, marshalling her courage.

"I am not your mother, nor will I ever be. From what Sirius and Remus have told me, Lily Potter was an extraordinary woman. People like that can never be replaced, only remembered. You and I've joked about it, but I would like for you to call me Mum, if you're comfortable with it that is." With a hint of impish humour, she added, "I am your mother in law after all."

Choked up, Harry croaked, "I'd like that. I'd like that very much." A second later, she took him in her arms. It was the first real hug from a mother he'd ever experienced. Oh, he'd had numerous hugs from Molly Weasley, but in the back of his mind, he knew that the redheaded matron was not his mother.

That nagging thought was absent as he fell into Alice Granger's embrace.

Harry returned to the present when Alice observed, "I was thinking that Sirius is a not only a pureblood, but the head of an Ancient and Noble house. I think that he could lead a counter in the press about this nonsense," she waved her hand at the ashes of the paper as they crumbled in the fireplace.

"I'm also a well-known blood traitor."

Steven thoughtfully rubbed his chin as he thought aloud, "I defer to your knowledge in the wizarding world Sirius, but the vast majority of people are ignorant about most of what they read in the paper. No matter what you say, you'll never convince those pureblood elitist twits," he gestured toward the fireplace and the burnt paper. "But you'll sway the masses who are ignorant. You're a well-known, popular figure. With your exoneration and wrongful imprisonment, most will see you as a sympathetic figure. It's worth considering."

His sober expression indicated Padfoot seriously considering the idea. Eventually, he hedged, "I'll do an interview. We'll go from there."

Tossing his napkin on the table, he murmured, "They'll want to talk about Midnight the entire time, I expect." Rising from the chair, eh made his way out before calling over his shoulder, "Moony, get a hold of that Shanahan chap you know at the Prophet to set things up, will you?"

When Sirius had cleared the doorway and was no longer in sight, Alice sighed as she asked, "Is he always so contrary?"

"Yes," Remus answered as he forked some eggs.

"AM NOT!" the voice of Padfoot the Invincible shouted from the hallway.

The breakfast room broke into laughter as the Earl of Blackmoor stomped to the pool for his morning physical therapy laps.

.oOo.

Harry and Hermione were in the practice room with a scattering of junk littering the floor. Hermione watched her husband calm himself, take a deep breath and close his eyes. After a moment of meditation, he lifted his wand as he opened his eyes. With a deft motion of his wand, he mass transfigured the contents of the room into saw blades. Another motion caused the blades to hover in the air as they rotated at high speed.

The Smartest Witch of the Age narrowed her eyes before conjuring seven mannequins, which immediately began to run about the room in random patterns.

Taking the hint, Harry cast a last spell that evenly divided the transfigured blades into groups, which then attacked the dummies.

When there was naught but sawdust and chunks of wood lying about, he ended the charm before casting the Finishing spell, allowing the saw blades to resume their original form.

Harry frowned, "That didn't go as I expected."

Nodding, Hermione asked the leading question, "Why?"

"Too many spells. I used three instead of just the one mass transfiguration and animating spell we read about yesterday."

"Why?" she repeated.

Shrugging, he replied, "I'm not too confident in it yet."

Nodding her understanding, Hermione smiled at an idea that popped into her head. "No sex until you cast it, then." He could pull off any spell when under pressure and they both knew it.

He turned to her with playful horror on his features. Bowing in a pseudo Quasimodo fashion, he whimpered, "Yes Mistress."

When she laughed, he turned back to the room, took a deep breath and centred himself before casting.

The various items leapt into the air, morphing into spinning saw blades as they moved. After, Hermione repeated her conjuration of mannequins, the blades automatically separated into groups before attacking their targets.

With a light-heartedly smug smile, he asked, "Good enough?"

An indecisive expression on her face, she wagged her head in a 'so-so' manner. "I don't know..."

Taking her in his arms, he kissed her deeply. After a good twenty seconds, he pulled back. "You were saying?"

With a dazed expression, she asked, "I don't know. What was I saying?"

"That you love me desperately and lust after my body."

Nodding, she pulled him close before kissing him with as much enthusiasm as he displayed before.

When she pulled back, he asked, "What were we doing?"

Without answering him, she turned toward the door. Pulling him along, she told him, "We were heading to our room. Quickly."

.oOo.

As they were eating lunch, Dobby popped in holding a silver salver with a letter on it. "This arrived for you, Master Harry."

Grumbling, Harry muttered, "Stop calling me Master, Dobby." Knowing his words were wasted, he grabbed the letter. "It's from the Headmaster," he announced, reading the return sender.

Breaking the seal, he unfolded the parchment. "He got a reply from that Duvail character and offers an appointment tomorrow to discuss the findings."

Sirius frowned, "What time?"

"Two."

"I'll be there," Harry's godfather replied before digging into his lunch.

Hermione turned to her parents, "Would you like to come with us to see the castle?"

Surprised, Steven asked, "Can we? I thought there were spells that kept us non-magical people out."

"There are, but we'll go in via the Floo, which bypasses all those wards."

Nodding, Steven turned to Alice. When she nodded, he told his daughter, "That would be great. We'd love to go."

The next day, the Family tromped to the entry hall fireplace of Rowan Hill. Sirius led the procession, calling out "Hogwarts, Transfiguration Office!"

Eventually, the entire Family was through the fireplace, standing in Minerva's common room. Minerva blinked at Steven and Alice's presence, but said nothing. With a curt, "Well, come on then," she led the mob to the Headmaster's office.

Eventually, they made their way to the oversized oval office. They found Dumbledore behind his desk chatting with an older man. Rising, the Headmaster greeted the visitors, "Welcome back all. Mr and Mrs Granger I presume?" he asked the non-magical parents.

When they nodded, he smiled warmly, "I'm very pleased to meet you. Your daughter is a credit to the both of you. A wonderful young woman, if I dare say."

"Thank you, Headmaster," Alice replied in a slightly confused tone.

Nodding to the rest, Dumbledore half turned to the older wizard in the room, "Everyone, this is M. Christian Duvail, my friend who is an expert in the art of Necromancy."

The old man had long greasy iron-grey hair. His yellow eyes were clouded, as if with cataracts and he stank. He did not offer his dirty long nailed hands in greeting. As Dumbledore introduced the group to the Necromancer, the Frenchman's disturbing gaze seemed to linger on Harry.

When they were all seated, Duvail cut to the chase, "I have viewed the memory provided by Albus. We have discussed many of the incidents of note regarding your Enemy and I have drawn a few conclusions."

Just like Dumbledore, the man seemed to have an affectation for the dramatic. He paused, regarding each of the visitors with a 'most serious expression', obviously attempting to increase the tension in the room.

When Sirius rolled his eyes and asked, "And?" the Necromancer got to the point.

"There are many rituals which can be undertaken to slow the aging process. The blackest of arts can even cause a cessation of aging, but the costs are very high indeed. Given the state of your Enemy prior to his banishment in nineteen eighty one and his appearance today, I believe I can draw some tentative conclusions.

"First, it is most likely that he did undergo the Rite of Ascension, which is the culminating ceremony in a series of magiks. The Rite of Ascension process stops aging altogether," forestalling all questions, he held up his hand. "Do not ask how it is accomplished for it is a most vile process."

Sighing, he extended a long finger as if counting, "Rite of Ascension, the Immersion of Hercules for strength," another finger ticked off, "The Eye of Horus for 'vision', again, do not ask."

Over the next few minutes, he discussed a series of rituals and procedures that he deduced Voldemort had undergone. "In the end, his body before banishment barely resembled his birth form. As such, that is why, I believe, he did not perish that fateful night," he gestured to Harry.

"The Killing curse is a most strange bit of magic. It forces the soul to depart this plane of existence. Even so, once the soul has vacated its human form, it cannot return. We have no way of knowing, but I believe that the reflected Killing curse cast by your Enemy that night was not at full potency. It is reasonable to assume that there was a significant energy loss due to the reflection of the spell. The weakened spell forced the soul from your Enemy's reinforced body, but did not have enough power to overcome the augmentations he had performed on his body and, therefore, to force the soul of your enemy from this plane of existence. Therefore, his soul resided in this plane of existence as a spectre of sorts."

Eyes were wide as the group contemplated this revelation. Eventually, Hermione concluded, "Then, when he is resurrected, he can be killed."

Nodding, Duvail held up a dirty finger, Turning his rheumy gaze on The Smartest Witch of the Age, he leered, "It will be most difficult, though. I have no doubt he has already arranged for a series of rituals so that he can regain his lost strength."

"How can he restore himself to a body?" Remus asked. "What will he need?"

"Blood of an enemy is a most common ingredient. The homunculus that he has taken as a transitory form is very flexible. I know of three rites he can undergo for restoration based on this form."

Harry groaned. They thought they'd set a trap at the graveyard for Little Hangleton by corralling the nascent Dark Lord into their finely woven kill sack. Now, they find out that Riddle had more options.

With a roll of parchment on a conjured lap desk, Remus asked, "Would you please describe the other methods? We'll need to prepare."

.oOo.

"So this is the infamous Potions classroom," Alice remarked as they stood outside the door. The foursome dodged the stream of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff fifth years that were letting out just then. "I loved chemistry in secondary school." Raising her eyebrows, she nodded to the doorway, "May we?"

"I don't see why not," Hermione answered.

Harry and Hermione were five steps in the doorway when Steven began laughing. "Cauldrons? Really? Where's the eye of newt?"

With a half-smile, Hermione replied, "On that shelf."

Steven followed his daughter's indication to its destination. His complexion paled a bit when he noticed some of the more revolting items that were preserved alongside the eye of newt.

"Yuck."

"Indeed sir. Many of our ingredients leave a bit to be desired in their appearance, but their qualities...well, are incredible."

The family turned to see a rotund man with a walrus moustache standing behind them. When the quickly identified Professor Slughorn noticed Harry, his beady eyes lit up like a cracker.

"My Lord!"

"Aw, fong," Harry muttered.

"How are you, Professor?" Hermione greeted.

In an amusing battle between manners and greed, Slughorn's eyes focused on Harry, then Hermione, back to Harry before finally settling on The Smartest Witch of the Age. "Miss Granger, it's very good to see you and Lord Harry well. When you departed school after winter break, I feared the worst."

Rolling his eyes, Harry suppressed a groan. Steven couldn't help himself, his mischievous nature had been curbed while living with the two living Marauders. In a prank war, he was significantly undergunned against Padfoot and Moony. With affected suspense, the dentist asked, "And what would the worst have been, sir?"

"Why, that they had withdrawn from school, sir," Slughorn replied as if the answer was as obvious as the day was long.

"We did withdraw," Harry grated.

"Oh." Frowning, the Potion professor looked at the teens as if trying to resolve their presence in his classroom while they were no longer students after all.

"We had other business in the castle today, so Harry and Hermione were kind enough to give us a tour," Alice explained.

"Of course. Such wonderful persons," Slughorn smirked. "I've no doubt they've given you the best of tours, Minerva and Filius sing their praises. Alas, I only had the privilege of teaching them for a month or so."

Resisting the urge to check his arse for love bites, Harry took Hermione's hand, "Good to see you, sir. We must be off to the

Quidditch Pitch. Mr Granger is anxious to see the school pitch after seeing Nelson Field."

"Oh, let me accompany you. I'm well acquainted with many professional..."

"That's unnecessary, sir. Thank you very much," the last was shouted as Harry had pulled Hermione out the door and halfway up the stairs in his rush to escape.

Once out the doors of the castle, the little family tucked up against the chilly wind. "What was his name?" Alice asked. "Collins?"

Hermione chuckled at the Austen allusion. "Close. Slughorn."

"Who in the world names these people?" Steven grouched.

.oOo.

"Most of these ingredients can be found anywhere," Sirius whinged as he glared at the list Remus had transcribed from the creepy Necromancer. He, Remus and Minerva had gathered in her office while Harry and Hermione gave Steven and Alice their tour.

"And for the rarer ingredients, I'm sure Severus has a private supplier available who will sell the necessary, no questions asked," grumbled Remus.

"If the price is right," finished Minerva.

"True," Remus agreed before sipping his tea.

"The only truly unique need for any of these rituals is the bone of the father, which we've disposed of, warded the area and routinely check to see if the area has been disturbed. The rest is just very rare and expensive." Remus was very annoyed. He'd hoped that the extremely disturbing Necromancer would have concrete leads upon which they could act. Instead, they found themselves amongst swirling vapour once again, grasping at metaphorical ghosts.

"Dammit! We don't have enough people to track down all these leads," Sirius growled as he waved a hand at the list. "We don't have enough time..."

All three were at war with themselves. They'd known that Voldemort was going to attempt to reconstitute himself sooner rather than later. They'd known it for a while, yet hadn't been able to accomplish much to prevent the resurrection. Removing the mortal remains of Tom Riddle Sr. and his parents had been the extent of the preventative measures available to the Family, yet they were still very frustrated with themselves.

"We don't have enough time," Sirius mused to himself as he sat back in his chair. With a wide smile, he barked his signature laugh while slapping Remus on the shoulder.

The devious expression on Sirius' face caused Remus to groan. With a hint of trepidation, Minerva asked, "What?"

"Does Longtooth still have that Time Turner?"

.oOo.

"You want to do what?" Hermione asked, her tone and expression accurately portraying her disbelief.

Rolling his eyes, Sirius repeated himself. "I want to use the Time Turner to start tracking down some of these wacko ingredients," Sirius waved the parchment in the air as he did so. "If we can narrow down what Snape and Voldemort are, or are not going to do, we might be able to funnel them to where we want them." The Family had returned to Rowan Hill and had been arguing about Sirius' idea for the previous thirty minutes. All except Harry had voiced an opinion. Until now.

"So we can kill him," Harry finished. The grim expression on The Boy-Who-Lived coupled with his soft tone caused Hermione to take Padfoot a bit more seriously.

"Padfoot," Harry broke in, "It's a good idea..."

"But?" Sirius asked.

"But it shouldn't be you who does it."

Sirius Black was many things, but humble, he wasn't. "And why not?" Padfoot challenged with more than a hint of anger.

"Because you don't have the knowledge or ability to run down the leads. Plus, you don't have the freedom to move anonymously in the circles we're talking about. Everyone knows Sirius Black, Lord Blackmoor. Just one Ending spell, and your Glamour would be dispelled. Then, the jig is up."

Narrowing his eyes, Sirius spat, "You're talking about sending Remus and Dora, aren't you?"

Harry's only reply was a solemn nod.

The whole Family had gathered for the discussion and as one, they leaned back in their chairs contemplating the proposition. Steven spoke up first.

"It's a good idea. They work well together, both can defend themselves adequately, Dora's metamorphing-whatsit will hone the edge that Remus' 'dark creature' status and his knowledge bring." Turning to the couple in question, the former Staff Sergeant of the British Army asked, "Are you up for it?"

With a smirk, Dora replied, "Remus is always up for it."

Rolled eyes from Minerva, Alice and, surprisingly, Sirius punctuated the snorts from Harry and Hermione. Steven just smiled at Remus' blush.

Clearing his throat, Remus answered, "I believe we can pull it off." The group sat down to plan the effort. In scope, the effort would have been executed by over one hundred Aurors in real time. In the end, they group calculated Remus and Dora would need at least ten full days to sweep Western Europe for the leads they were pursuing.

"I'll head to Gringotts," Sirius announced as he stood. Glancing at Alice, who was computing costs for the effort, he asked, "How much?"

Chewing on the end of the quill, Alice replied, "Five thousand Pounds, same in Francs, but better make it ten thousand

Deutschmarks. They're going to be in Bavaria and Berlin for quite a while."

Remus added, "One hundred and fifty thousand Galleons for purchases," without looking up from his tabulations. Dora, Harry, Minerva, Hermione and Steven were going over a series of maps of Western Europe correlating places and persons to be investigate.

Dora told the group a few minutes after Sirius left, "We'll Turn three times a day. That'll stretch the search over four real-time days." Glaring at the witches and wizards assembled, "None of you clowns had better send us a Communication charm. I'd end up getting the same message three times daily and not know when the bloody hell I should be getting it. That would really make me angry"

With mock seriousness, Harry added, "And we don't want to make you angry."

.oOo.

Sirius had almost forgotten about his appointment with the reporter from the Daily Prophet. At half one on Saturday afternoon, Remus casually cast a Stinging hex at his oldest friend.

Harry snickered. Remus hadn't even looked up from the book he was reading, yet still nailed Padfoot right between the eyes.

"Bloody hell, Moony! What was that for?" Sirius shouted as he leapt to his feet. Padfoot's hands seemed undecided. One was vigorously rubbing the welt on his forehead, while the other groped in his pockets for his wand.

"You're about to miss the appointment that you insisted I make for you with Shanahan." Remus was placid as he turned the page of his book.

"I insisted," Sirius repeated as he scowled at Alice.

"Yes. You. Now get a move on you lazy lout."

"I am not a..."

"Yes you are. Move."

Grumbling, Sirius turned from the room, casting the countercharm on his swelling forehead.

When the fireplace's roar subsided, Alice began to chuckle. "I swear, if I didn't know better, I'd think you two were married."

Finally, Remus looked up from his book. "Alice, I'm a very open minded man. I'd like to think that I have a level of tolerance and acceptance for those of homosexual orientation, but the mere thought of Padfoot like that..." Remus' 'mature, reasoned voice' was spoiled when he visibly shivered.

"Aw, is my poor Wolfie grossed out?" Tonks teased as she slipped into her lover's lap.

Scrunching his face up like a five year old, Remus protested, "It's Padfoot!"

"I'm sure that some woman will find him attractive. Eventually," Hermione teased.

The joviality faded from Remus' face as he traded a look with Steven.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Hmm?" Remus asked, feigning ignorance.

Annoyed, Harry shook his finger at his father's friend, "None of that, Moony my man. What's with that look?"

Steven smoothly intercepted his son in law, "Remus and I are just keeping tabs on Sirius. He hasn't shown much inclination to get into the dating scene."

"Before Azkaban, Sirius was something of a ladies' man," Remus explained.

"You're both daft," the incredulous Harry announced. "For him, all that time in prison was time where his life was on hold. I'm sure for him, my parents were killed less than a year ago. On top of it, he spent a dozen years embracing his inner Dementor. His world

exploded, then imploded before it crumbled and you want him to go on a date?"

The look Steven and Remus exchanged was more sheepish than their previous look. "When you put it that way..." Remus admitted.

Rolling his eyes, Harry grumbled, "How else is there to put it?" before he resumed his study.

.oOo.

It was somewhat amusing for Harry to watch Minerva fuss over Remus and Dora as they prepared to set off. The usually stoic professor façade had given way to the concerned parent who lived in the Highland woman's heart. Harry caught Hermione watching the fussing with an amused smile on her face. The smile became a bark of laughter when Minerva cast a quick spell to repack the trunk full of clothes.

Sirius stepped in to avert bloodshed when he saw Minerva's scowl. "Come on, Min. Let 'em be. Remus is a big boy and Dora will keep him mostly out of trouble."

With a bright eye, Minerva nodded. Quick as a snake, she took the Lycanthrope and Metamorph's hands in her own. "I've lost too many. Come back to us," she pled in an undertone.

All smiles faded. With as much seriousness as she could muster, Dora told the eldest of their Family, "We'll come home to you. To all of you," she added as she looked around the room to the gathered.

Her uncharacteristic seriousness was an indication that young Dora Tonks knew the full extent of her mission. She and her beloved were actively walking into the cobra's nest. While not actively courting an encounter with the nascent Lord Voldemort, an encounter with the Dark Lord was very possible. Not many survived such a meeting.

Alice stood forward, taking Dora in her arms. "We'll pray for your safety," Alice promised. It still surprised Harry that Alice and Steven were such devout Catholics. Religion was nearly unheard of in the Magical world and to be Catholic in England was to be in a distinct minority. Nonetheless, she and Steven still attended Mass every Sunday in their parish back in Kent. Instead of jumping in Steven's

rebuilt Aston Martin to head the four kilometres to St Antony's, though, they were side along Apparated by their children to the unused lane behind the church.

Steven shook Remus' hand firmly. The two men had become fast friends in a way far different than any of the other men. Both were warriors. Both were scholars who fought because of a sense of duty, not out of choice.

Remus was engulfed in an embrace by Sirius, which quickly became emotional for all present. The last time Padfoot and Moony had been separated for any length of time Sirius had been incarcerated. "Take care, brother," Sirius whispered in Moony's ear. Remus could only nod in return.

Sirius stood in front of Dora, evaluating her. When she began to fidget, Padfoot placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, looked her in the eye before telling her, "I love you Dora. Take care of yourself and Remus. I need you to come home."

Touched, Dora could only nod. Moving toward the door, Dora and Remus were engulfed in silent hugs from the time traveling teens. No words came to any of the four, only sentiment that was adequately conveyed through their loving embraces. With a last nod to the Family, Remus took Dora's hand and led her to the front hall. All held their breath until the crack-crack of their Apparition caused Alice to jump.

None moved. Dora and Remus were venturing into places that made Knockturn Alley seem like Hyde Park on a sunny afternoon. They would have attempts on their lives just for walking through the door; much less for the questions they needed answering. Thieves, murderers, rapists and sadists were the commonplace denizens of the dens of iniquity. Those were the cheerful types they expected to encounter on this investigation. Nascent dark lords, lesser demons, vampires and hags were the less jolly beings they expected to meet.

Harry and Hermione headed to bed. Minerva and Sirius had the first shift to be on call. The Family had discussed being available to respond to an emergency summons from either of their advance team, so they had paired up accordingly. Harry and Hermione had doses of a light sleeping draught on their nightstands to help them rest. They took over from Sirius and Minerva at six PM and were on

watch until midnight. The pairs were switching off every six hours while Remus and Dora were gone. It would prove to be a long four days.

.oOo.

Four hours of sleep later, Harry and his wife stumbled into the study. At the silent question from his godson, Sirius shook his head. "Nothing verbal." Hermione was moving to the far side of the room, her wand out and trained on three small crates. "Those arrived with your portkeys around five," Sirius explained. Their plan had included Remus and Dora purchasing as much of the ingredients as they could from the list provided by the Necromancer. These crates were their first catch of the day. Harry moved a few feet behind his wife who was casting every detection spell of which she'd learned in their very extensive training.

Maliciously enchanted objects had been a favourite of Emperor Voldemort. He ordered his Death Eaters to scatter items of nightmare across the lands that were ruled under the black flag adorned with skull and snake. The nearest the Potters could tell was that Voldemort did it for his own private amusement. Desiccation curses, Soulfire, which consumed the person from the inside out and Detonation curses were among his favourite party favours. This proliferation of Voldemort's deadly toys spurred Harry and Hermione's extensive knowledge regarding the detection and destruction of dark objects.

Five minutes later, Hermione nodded to herself, satisfied that the crates were what they purported to be. Harry moved forward to open the first crate with as much care as he could muster. After a minute he pulled the lid off before tossing it to the side. One glance inside was all it took. Immediately, he turned away to vomit.

Hermione's curiosity overrode her good sense. She too peeked in the crate, only to turn away in revulsion and horror.

Standing back, Sirius and Minerva had nearly fearful expressions. "Do I want to know?" Sirius asked.

"Dead infants preserved in some greenish liquid. Each child was flayed alive," came Hermione's whispered reply.

Swallowing heavily, Sirius attempted to quip, "I'm perfectly Ok leaving the other crates unopened." Minerva shakily nodded her agreement.

Wiping his mouth, Harry Vanished the sick on the floor, performed an Air Freshening charm followed by a Mouth Freshening charm. "As am I. Go ahead, get some sleep. We'll call if anything happens."

.oOo.

One more crate arrived at eleven PM. No one opened it.

.oOo.

Emotionally and physically wiped out, Harry conjured a bed in the corner of the study before placing a Silencing ward around it. The newly awakened Sirius and Minerva called for Dobby to provide tea as the Potters transfigured their jeans and t-shirts into pyjamas. Wordlessly, the young couple fell into bed before unconsciously reaching for each other. It was a long time before they fell asleep in each other's arms.

.oOo.

At three AM, a small barrel smelling suspiciously of petrol arrived. Minerva conjured a large steel drum into which she Levitated the new arrival. Sirius sealed the drum; their unspoken agreement never to look in any of the arriving containers was a given fact. No words needed to be said.

.oOo.

At nine in the morning the next day, Hermione abandoned all pretext of reading the book that had lain in her lap unnoticed for the previous two hours. The most recent crate had come around sunrise, a note attached to the top.

All,

Shopping list progressing. Finished our first three days and have about a quarter of the necessary. No word regarding the old friends we're so anxious to meet up with but rumour is rife. One day they're

reported to be in Berlin, the next day Paris and the day after that, Calais.

Funds holding out well, but we're exhausted. Will take a fourth day to rest. All our love,

Moony and Stripes

"He's wounded," Sirius declared after handing the note to Harry.

Quickly reading the note as Hermione leaned over her husband's shoulder to see the missive, Harry asked, "This 'exhausted' bit?"

"Yeah. If she were hurt, they'd be 'beat'. If they were unhurt, there'd be no mention of tiredness."

As Minerva read the note, Hermione added, "And the word about Voldemort is that he's moving west. We may be too late."

.oOo.

Deep under Rowan Hill, there were storage rooms. Far beneath the massive wine cellar, there were vast storage rooms, which were set up to be cold boxes for meat. Hooks, metal shelves and the like were the very obvious giveaway.

Here, deep underground, Harry began ferrying their newly acquired dark arts ingredients. Hermione had been all for destroying everything as it arrived. Of all people, Minerva had cautioned prudence. "I cannot fathom a legitimate need for any of the foul things to be acquired, but there may come a time when we may need this cache."

Now that the purchases were rolling in and they all saw exactly what they were purchasing, Minerva had changed her tune. "Destroy it all," she had snarled.

With regretful eyes, Harry had shaken his head, "Thirty days, we agreed. We'll hold it for that period of time before it all goes to the bottom of the Atlantic."

.oOo.

Minerva and Sirius followed Harry's example by conjuring beds for themselves in the study. No one wanted to leave. Dobby provided them with snacks, twice daily cold collations along with the standard English breakfast. The tension was palpable in the room as the six remaining members of the Family waited for deliveries and news. Steven and Alice were spending over eighteen hours a day in the room with the on duty couple. For the most part, things were quiet. No news was good news.

Alastor had been kept in the dark about the entire operation. Minerva had explained that her old friend's Auror oaths would compel him to act in an official capacity with all the dark arts activity in which they were engaging. To relieve him of a sticky situation, they left him out the planning and execution altogether with a cryptically worded message that his interests would best be served by staying away from the Welsh estate for the next week.

Harry and Steven played an on again, off again game of Cribbage, but neither man could muster much enthusiasm. When Steven narrowly beat Harry by four pegs, both of them were relieved they could forsake the façade of the game.

More crates continued to arrive. Harry kept sending them to the storage room.

Day two ended with a note similar to the one from the first day.

All,

More progress today. Over halfway home now with a few bargains to boot. Stripes had a wonderful encounter with an old lady that left her in stitches, I'm sure she'll tell you about it when we get home. We're beat, so heading to bed. Absolutely no word today about our old friends; bit distressing really.

Hope all is well at home and we'll see you on time or maybe even be home a bit early.

All our love,

Moony and Stripes

"Dora's hurt, isn't she?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, looks like something tore her up. Based on the 'old lady' comment, it was either a hag or a harpy. Neither are a barrel of laughs." Sirius sat heavily, the guilt of his young cousin's injury weighing on him.

Holding her head in her hands, Hermione muttered, "If it were really bad, he'd bring her home."

They all hoped The Smartest Witch of the Age was right.

.oOo.

More disgusting parcels arrived on day three. No longer able to stomach having the unknown materials in his home, Harry began systematically to magically translocate the crates, barrels and parcels as far from his home as he could. His best estimation was five thousand miles to the southwest; right dead centre in the Atlantic Ocean.

Returning to the study, he sat heavily next to his wife. Hermione gave him a sad smile, "You couldn't stand it anymore?"

Shaking his head, he wrapped his arm around his wife.

"Ocean?"

"Yeah."

Leaning on his shoulder, Hermione closed her eyes. "Good."

.oOo.

Day four began with a whimper. No deliveries arrived until four in the afternoon. A small box arrived with a note attached to the top.

Gather the family. We'll be home shortly.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Very soon Moony and the newly named Stripes would be home where they would be safe. Scrubbing his face with his hands, Harry didn't realize how tense he'd become over the previous days.

As the tension bled out of him, he moved to stand behind his wife. Gentle at first, he began to massage her shoulders and upper back. Increasing pressure until Hermione groaned, Harry began to cajole the tension from her body.

Looking about the room he saw Alice give Steven a smile in response to one of the many quirky jokes with which he was constantly teasing her. Minerva was leaning back in her chair, her eyes closed and a small smile playing at the ends of her mouth.

"Harry, look at this," Sirius called, his voice strangely strained. The Boy-Who-Lived had moved to a bench, leaning on his knees. Looking up at his godfather, Harry cocked an eyebrow in reply.

Sighing heavily, Sirius turned around the evening edition of the paper. Below the fold on the front page was a small article. Albus Dumbledore Missing?

Now frowning, Harry asked, "What's it say?"

Returning to the article, Sirius read snippets aloud as the rest of the room paid attention. "Last seen two days ago in his office...discovered missing after failing to attend the weekly staff meeting...his office showed signs of struggle...Deputy Head McGonagall unavailable for comment while on holiday."

The tension that had dissipated when Remus' note arrived, reappeared in full force. All were forcibly reminded of Dumbledore's comment to Harry when they met a few weeks before, "You must be vigilant, Harry. You and I are his prime targets. He will come for us first."

The tension became oppressive as Harry stood before moving to the window. Staring out the window into the grey, rain filled sky, The Boy-Who-Lived was quiet. The Smartest Witch of the Age had arrived at the same conclusion as the rest, all were too afraid to say it aloud, though. Needing his familiar presence, she embraced Harry from behind, laying her head on his back.

"They've got the Headmaster, don't they?" Alice asked in an undertone.

"Most likely," Hermione replied.

"Can we save him?" her mother persisted.

Steven answered for his daughter, "Most likely not."

The pall resettled as the occupants waited for Remus and Dora.

"Why didn't you have another vision?" Sirius asked his godson.

Shaking his head, Harry replied, "Don't know. I've been thinking about that and can't figure out what happened. Nothing's changed since the last time."

"Except Voldemort," Hermione corrected. Moving to a chair, the tired witch sat heavily. Running her fingers through her thick locks, the twenty eight year old going on fifteen year old girl slipped into her 'bossy voice', "We believe the connection between Harry and Voldemort is due to the curse that failed. Therefore, the connection was initiated, maintained and centred on Voldemort. Symptomatically, the connection changed over time. First year, there was always pain when Voldemort was near."

"But that could also be caused by his vicious Legilimancy technique."

"True. Second year doesn't count. The diary was some weird dark arts Avatar that wasn't really Tom Riddle, but a projection of him in the same way a magical portrait is a projection of a person. Fourth year he came back, but the connection changed when he took your blood in the resurrection ceremony."

"He could touch me without pain. Unlike first year." Mentally and emotionally exhausted, Harry leaned his head against the glass of the window, closing his eyes in a vain attempt to deny the truth.

Nodding, Hermione sighed. She hadn't been this tired since...well a long time. "Yes, the connection changed alongside gaining immunity to your mother's protection that Voldemort acquired through the blood based resurrection ceremony. However, said ceremony intensified the link between the two of you. This new connection allowed your insight to his emotions along with more frequent visions during fifth year."

"Which is the state I was in during the last vision."

"But something has now changed the connection again," Hermione concluded, reluctant to state her conclusion aloud.

Minerva did it for her. "Voldemort has been resurrected, using Albus' blood instead of Harry's."

Unable to respond, Hermione nodded.

"But that happened afterwards, what about the 'pre' part? Shouldn't Harry have seen that?" Steven asked.

In all seriousness, Sirius replied for the witches and wizards, "Magic is strange."

Taking the answer for what Padfoot meant, Steven nodded.

Harry continued to stare out the window. Hermione leaned back in the chair, eyes closed in resignation. Sirius looked at the paper, unable to focus long enough to read. Minerva sat stiffly in her chair, staring into the fire. Alice absently continued her embroidery project while Steven played with his Rubik's cube.

They waited.

An eternal thirty minutes later, Remus and Dora arrived via portkey before collapsing.

.oOo.

"He's coming around, Andi,"

Andromeda moved to Remus' side, casting diagnostic spells the entire time. Two hours ago, Harry had Apparated into her lounge, shouted at her to grab her Healer bag before Apparating her to Rowan Hill.

Sirius and Steven had carried Dora and Remus to the conjured beds in the room while Alice and Minerva began to inspect the inert couple for wounds. Remus' legs were badly bruised and he had a cut that ran the length of his right arm. Dora had a very odd mark on her upper abdomen. It wasn't quite a scar, nor was it a wound.

When Andromeda arrived with a windswept Harry, she set to work. Minerva, Alice and Hermione fetched potions and provided general nursing duties. Steven and the other men alternated running errands with watching the proceedings.

It was evident quickly, that Remus had been badly beaten at one point. His legs had been smashed to splinters and his arm nearly severed. "He shows signs of healing, but sporadic, battlefield type first aid," Andromeda had commented as she vanished the bones in Moony's legs. As she poured Skele-Gro into his mouth while casting the Swallowing charm, she heard Sirius whisper, "You stupid bastard, you were supposed to come home if it got bad."

The cut was superficial. Handing a clean bandage along with a pot of salve to Alice, the Casualty Healer turned to her daughter.

When Andromeda shuddered before taking a deep, cleansing breath, it was obvious to all that the woman was forcibly shoving her personal feelings aside so as to better treat her daughter.

The first two diagnostic spells had negative results, causing Andi to frown in puzzlement. "Take a look at this," Alice beckoned. Lifting Dora's shirt, she exposed the odd mark.

"Oh my God."

A quick diagnostic confirmed Andi's guess. Diving for her bag of potions, she snarled, "Hag."

Minerva gasped while Sirius paled. Alice turned to her daughter for an explanation. "Hags eat liver. The fresher the better," Hermione elaborated with distaste.

"So..."

"Yes," Andi spat while she forced a series of potions down her daughter's throat. "She most likely used her metamorph abilities to help recover from the attack. Right now, she has sixty two percent of a functioning liver."

Potion after potion went down the young woman's throat. As the tears dripped down Minerva's face, Dora consumed a Blood

Replenishing potion. When Alice succumbed to tears for her friend while wrapped in her husband's numb arms, Andi force-fed another Organ Growth potion into her daughter. As Hermione and Harry watched, helpless in their terror, another Blood Chemistry Stabilization potion was administered. When Sirius collapsed in a puddle of his own tears for his brother and cousin who were both so much more, Andi finished the last spell – Suspensor Vitalis.

When the exhausted Healer sank to the couch next to Minerva, the old Transfiguration professor wordlessly wrapped Andromeda in an embrace. Then the blonde mother let herself feel. And, unfortunately, think about what had transpired.

Her daughter, the light of her life was very near death alongside the man with whom her daughter was desperately in love. First came the shaking. Andromeda trembled like a four year old child during a particularly loud thunderstorm. Eyes wide, the witch was incapable of dodging the freight train of emotion that was barrelling down on her.

Then the screams started. Wordless shouts of fury and fear mingled with wails for her daughter and son in all but blood. That storm passed quickly.

Still Minerva held on to the blonde mother.

Finally, the sobs came and Andi joined the rest of the room in their cries of fear and fury for the most unique members of the family: Moony and Stripes.

Ten minutes later, Remus began to stir.

"Dora..." he moaned.

Sirius took his best friend's hand while Andromeda cast a series of diagnostic spells. "She's right here, Moony. Andi's taking care of her and she'll be fine. Just fine."

His eyes fluttering, Remus asked, "What happened?"

"You were badly beaten Remus. I've Vanished the bones in your legs and pelvis while I regrow them with Skele-Gro. We've some potion work ahead of us to fix the nerve damage in your arm, but in

the end, I'm confident that everything will be just fine." Andromeda's voice was crisp and business like while a warmth permeated her tone that was usually not present when speaking to patients.

"Dora?"

The grin on Andromeda's face faltered for a moment, telling Remus all he needed to know. "Will she be well? Eventually?"

"Eventually, she will be well."

"I'm so sorry. I was haggling with the dealer and had my back turned for a minute. The only warning was Dora's grunt. By the time I'd turned, she'd already killed the hag. She was a bit pale, but waved me off, telling me she was fine. I didn't get the whole truth out of her until about an hour before we returned."

Grasping Andromeda's arm, Moony pleaded, "You've got to believe me. If I'd known she was so badly hurt, we'd have come back immediately."

Patting his arm, a few tears gathering in the corner of her eyes, Andromeda comforted the man who would soon enough be her son in law, "I believe you Remus. I never doubted at all. Now, I'm going to give you a Sleeping Draught. You need your sleep. We're all here to watch over the two of you."

For the first time, Moony scanned the room, taking in the anxious faces of his Family. With his little half smile, he wordlessly reassured them just as their presence reassured him in his turn.

Focusing on Harry, Remus' face became grave, "They have Albus."

Grim, Harry nodded his understanding. "We know. Rest now. We'll talk more later."

.oOo.

"I must return to Hogwarts. I'm needed." Minerva rose, only to be embraced by Hermione. The Smartest Witch of the Age clung to the stately witch for a long moment, reassuring herself that up truly was up and down was down. At this point, with Albus Dumbledore most

likely dead as a sacrifice in Voldemort's resurrection ceremony, Hermione was looking for all the emotional anchors she could find.

"It will be well, my wee bairn," Minerva finished with her tongue firmly in her cheek.

Pulling back, Hermione cocked an eyebrow, "Bairn?"

A small smile tugged at the corner of Minerva's mouth, "To me, lass, you'll always be a bairn." A quick caress of Hermione's face preceded the departure of the new Headmistress of Hogwarts.

"Andi," Alice asked, "Should we contact Ted for you?" Andi was on the night shift at the hospital, which accounted for her presence at the house when Harry blew through the wards as if they were so much tissue paper.

The distraught healer's gaze flickered from her daughter for a second before nodding her head with a jerky motion. "Please."

"I'll go," Sirius volunteered as he stood. Unbidden, Dobby appeared with Sirius' cloak. "Thanks," Sirius muttered before turning back to his oldest friend. "Get well, brother," Sirius put voice to his fear in the form of a plea.

Twenty minutes later, Ted Tonks swept into the sitting room.

.oOo.

There was no simmering hostility from Andromeda during this recovery period for Dora as there had been the previous time. Granted, her injuries on this occasion were far more serious, but that didn't seem to affect Andromeda and Ted. It was as if time had been rewound to Christmas so that the family could enjoy each other's presence without distractions.

Once Moony and Stripes' health was stabilized, Alastor was called in for discussions. Honouring the Tonks' unspoken decision to stay out of the war, the talks moved to the Lord's study.

Remus was nestled in the corner under a series of blankets. Finishing the recounting of their 'buying expedition', he scowled, "We were talking quite seriously about having some of those days

Memory charmed. Horror layered with revulsion was the daily schedule." Shivering, the usually stoic Moony told more with his actions than with his words.

Moody ignored the finer feelings of the Lycanthrope, "How did you know about Albus?"

"At the last place, a Dark Arts bazaar in Hungary, a reveller stumbled into the booth where I was negotiating. He was shouting about 'the Dark Lord being back', and 'Raise a glass'.

"I damn near killed him when he joyfully recounted that at the resurrection ceremony, there had been representatives from many of the continental groups we've been watching. Of course, the subjugation of Albus was a cornerstone of the resurrection. Apparently, it took him hours to die..." Remus trailed off as the others in the room reflected and grieved for the old wizard. They'd not always agreed with the man. Hell, most of the time they'd not even liked the man, but they all respected his general contributions to magical society. He failed many and failed often, but he had made a positive impact on many lives.

"Those witnesses of Voldemort's resurrection, they had scattered to the four winds with the news that Voldemort was back. He has a ready made support base on the continent now. Since we've decimated his home grown forces, he decided to develop a new group of pseudo soldiers."

"But that kind of help can't be as good as the kind that he's been cultivating here," Steven observed. Mad-Eye nodded in agreement, confirming Steven's supposition.

Scowling, Remus remembered, "As it was, I still levelled that happy bastard with a right cross. I noticed Dora's pale complexion, figured she was hurt much worse than she let on and decided it was time to get the hell out of there."

Mad-Eye leaned back in his chair. "We need to be ready. With him having an audience like that, he's going to move right away." Nodding at Harry, Alastor elaborated, "In your first time, the only witnesses he had to his rebirth were marked Death Eaters, those he trusted as far as an animal like Voldemort can trust. These foreign fighters are just hired wands as far as Voldemort is concerned. He

probably doesn't trust them any further than he can throw them. For them to be present and able to carry away the tale, he must be ready to move or nearly so." Tapping on his chin with a scarred hand, he contemplated the next move.

Standing, he moved to the door. Over his shoulder he announced, "I've got to warn Amelia. With Azkaban gone and Dumbledore dead, he'll move on the Ministry."

"The Ministry..." Hermione mused as Mad-Eye left. Turning to Harry, she kissed him soundly. "I've got it."

"You bet you do, but we really don't have time for that right now," Harry joked.

Rolling her eyes, she told him, "I've got an idea of how we can lure Voldemort out of his hidey hole."

The room stilled as Hermione explained her idea.

.oOo.

The view from the peak of Snowden is beautiful. To the southwest lay Cardigan Bay, feeding Tremadoc Bay on whose coasts lay the rolling estate of Rowan Hill. To the west lay the lesser known Caernarfon Bay. Watching the rolling waves crashing on the shore seemed to distract him for a few moments.

To the East lay the rolling Cambrian Mountains. These had long served as a natural border for the Welsh coastal cities from the predations of the English. Eventually, even the Cambrian's were overcome in the 'establishment' of the United Kingdom.

Far to the north lay the Isle of Man. Harry couldn't see it; the curvature of the Earth precluded direct viewing. If Snowden were a thousand metres taller, he might have seen the looming shadow, which indicates an island on the horizon.

The Boy-Who-Lived looked at the scenery but did not see. It had been a run of a few hours in his animagus form. The dark of the night had hardly slowed Midnight. Preoccupied, Harry's gaze flitted from sight to sight, never resting nor taking in what was in front of him.

He'd almost lost Moony and Stripes and that tore at him. He knew that in war, sometimes you lose those closest to you. Sardonicly chuckling to himself, he muttered, "If there's anyone alive who knows that, it's me."

Sitting on the overlarge boulder, he continued his staring without seeing. The sky lightened and the stars faded. Still his was immobile.

Hermione. He couldn't lose her again. At the same time, she'd tear his lungs out through his nose if he even suggested that she stay behind for the upcoming fight. His fear ebbed and flooded. At one point he was filled with terror at the thought of losing his beloved, the next he was nearly accepting of whatever fate could decree.

Scrubbing his face, he sighed. The wind shifted as it had for time immemorial. With the coming of the sun, the wind shifted from the east to the west. In times of old, all power came from the west.

Beyond the dictates of the prophecy, he had to face Voldemort. No one else could defeat the man. No one else could end the suffering that was to come. No one had the motivation to stand in defiance of the monster Tom Riddle had become.

Voldemort would never leave Harry be – Harry knew this. In the future that was, he and Hermione had dispatched twelve Hunter Teams that were specifically looking for Harry Potter. The man was relentless paired with the memory of the elephants. He would always be looking over his shoulder for the Prophesized One who would Have The Power.

The red eyed monster would always come for Harry and so there would never be peace for the green eyed seeker. Hermione would always be threatened. Any children he and Hermione would have would live under the shadow of the Dark Lord. The Family would always have to be in hiding. Loved ones and friends would die or be hurt.

In the meeting engagement to come, though, those he loved could very well die. Hermione had told him that the Family was extraordinary. Harry could now see the truth in her words. None of them would be left behind in the final sally against the wizard who would be emperor. All would stand into danger. None would go

gently in to that good night that threatened to overtake Britain, even though none now alive, outside the Family, knew that the darkness threatened.

"Enough," he declared to the world.

Standing tall at the highest point in his native lands, Harry Potter, Earl of Richmond and heir to line of Godric Gryffindor and Rowena Ravenclaw, set his face to the west wind. The sun rose at his back, slowly illuminating the forests at his feet. The world came alive inch by inch, yet still he stood, finally seeing.

The sun came out.

Behind him, he heard the soft padding of a lioness, causing him to smile at her timing. Why not, though? he mused to himself. In the end, she'd always been his sun, his life.

Silently, she wrapped her arms about him from behind. Pressing herself to mould to him, she whispered, "Dora's awake."

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to all who reviewed the first twelve chapters. Story status, as always, can be found on my Author's page on FanFiction(dot)net.

2. Recommendation for the chapter is Delenda Est, an excellent Harry/Bellatrix time travel story by Lord Silvere, which gives an excellent portrayal of pureblood politics...in the '70s.

Chapter 14

"Remus, leave off. I'm recovering from an injury, I'm not a child." Dora had been very patient. She'd accepted her parents' hovering over her for the past four days. She'd accepted the constant presence of a member of the Family in her and Remus' rooms. She'd accepted many things, but if Remus really thought that she was going to let him help her in the toilet, he was fucking crazy.

"But Dora, your Mum said..." Remus protested.

"My Mum said I was to take it easy for the rest of the week. No shifting, no magic and no exercise. She didn't say that you were to carry me to the loo for crying out loud. And she most certainly did not say that you were to help me use the toilet." Scowling at her beau, the usually even tempered witch ordered, "Get out of here and send Hermione in to help me. I'll call you when I'm ready."

Meekly, Remus exited the room. Dora flopped back on the bed, feeling like a complete heel. He loved her and was reacting in the same way that ninety percent of the male population would if their significant other had been wounded or hurt. In fact, he was acting the same way she had when Remus had been attacked by those bastards outside Orleans. For the full period of their 'rest' day, she had hovered over him as he ingested a superhuman quantity of the stopgap all-purpose healing potions.

Her lip curled into an unconscious snarl as she remembered taking her vengeance on the small coven of Vampires who thought it'd be funny to 'toy with the Wolf'. Vampire ash is very fine but gritty. It takes forever to get out of your hair.

After thirty seconds of musing, Hermione opened the door with a quick rat-a-tat knock.

"He's just trying to help," Hermione chastised in a soft voice.

"I know," Dora replied as she glared at the ceiling. Turning to the young woman she considered to be a sister, she asked, "But would you want Harrikins to help you take a piss?"

"Ah, that would be a big 'No'," Hermione replied with a smile.

"Thought so. Get over here," she beckoned with a wave, "I gotta go."

Two minutes later, a much more comfortable Dora Tonks settled back on her bed. "How's the abdomen?" Hermione asked.

"Sore, but getting better." Glaring at the the potion rack next to her bed, she cursed, "I'll be really glad to get rid of that shite."

They sat in silence for a long minute before Dora announced, "I'm going to ask Remus to marry me."

A big smile broke on Hermione's face. "Waiting for him to get off the stick might take a while, eh?"

With a muted braying laugh, Dora agreed, "That's the truth." Tugging at the edge of her sheets, she asked, "How did you know that Harry was 'the one'?"

A soft smile replaced the happy expression on The Smartest Witch of the Age's face. With real emotion in her voice, she explained, "When I realized that I really couldn't be the me that I wanted to be without him. When I realized I wanted him to be the father of my children. When I realized that I wanted him to be there when I woke up every day for the rest of my life." Sighing, she looked out the window. "In the end, all that was overwhelmed by the fact that I just knew. There was no doubt, no hesitation about if he was the one. It was merely a matter of when I was going to shag him senseless,"

Dora smiled at the humour before sobering. "Yeah. The other stuff is just icing. He's...he's my best friend, you know?"

Nodding, Hermione replied, "Yeah, I do."

.oOo.

BLACKMOOR DENOUNCES You-Know-Who

"He makes me sound like a moron."

Hermione kissed Sirius on the cheek, "You don't need a reporter to do that. You do an excellent job all by yourself."

"Har-har," Sirius mocked.

"You don't sound like a moron," Harry countered as he set down the paper. "It's a good article that raises quite a few valid concerns. As the pureblood head of a notable pureblood house, your condemnation of Voldemort and his values is controversial. This point about losing touch with traditional wizard values is not just a smoke screen for pureblood mania."

When Sirius pulled a doubtful face, Hermione asked, "Did your parents impart nothing of value to you?"

Scowling, Sirius admitted, "Not all of it was disgusting pureblood mania, just most of it."

"And the valuable parts?" Hermione persisted.

"They were insistent that family was vital."

"But that's not a wizarding value. I'd like to think that's a universal value," Alice interjected.

"True, but the family magic is important for the wards." Waving his hands, Sirius explained, "Rowan Hill is older than any of the Black homes, but the wards here were very weak because a Potter hadn't lived here since Harry's grandfather. James and Lily lived here for maybe six months before going into hiding. Uncle Charlus and Aunt Dorea had been dead for a few years before that. So for over twenty years, the place was uninhabited by the Lord and Lady. As a result, the wards failed over time."

"But that firm you hired fixed everything," Steven asked Harry.

Nodding through his porridge, Harry swallowed. "Yes, we've nigh on unbreakable wards, but I spent over a million sterling to get them up to scratch."

Steven silently shook his head at the amount of money Harry casually spent, but followed up with a valid question, "So how does Harry living here affect the wards?"

Smiling smugly, Sirius emphasized, "With Harry and Hermione living here and as magically strong as they are, the wards are spiralling up

in strength and durability. By this time next year, it's unlikely anyone could breach the wards here."

"Even Voldemort?"

"Even him."

"Why then have you all been bringing down others wards? Those people have been living in those homes, sometimes for centuries."

Sirius smiled, "Because we've had two ArchMages living here. When Longtooth brought down the wards at Macnair's house, I bet she expended more magical energy in the five seconds it took to cascade the wards as most wizards will expend in ten years."

Turning his head to his blushing daughter, Steven whistled, "Remind me not to brass you off, Pumpkin."

"Getting back to Sirius," Hermione interrupted. "What else did your parents do that was worthwhile?"

Shrugging, Sirius replied, "They made a big deal out of respecting magic."

Frowning, Alice asked, "What does that mean?"

Sighing, Padfoot explained, "Most magical persons use magic as a tool. They casually do everything with magic. Dictation quills instead of writing a letter, magical doors and the like in lieu of servants or whatnot. My parents looked down on 'the commoners' who had no respect for magic and its role in our lives."

"Magic is to be respected?" Steven asked.

"Most definitely," Harry replied. "I didn't grow up with it, but I've come to realize that magic can give the illusion of invincibility when what it really does is make life easier. Magic can be perverted to do what we ought to do ourselves. I can talk to my wife about a problem we have or I can cast a spell, bending her to my will. There's a lot more, but it's all in the same vein."

Alice had heard far too much about Orion and Walburga Black to think they had been pure of heart, so she was a bit sceptical, "Your parents taught you to not overdo it with magic?"

Snorting, Sirius replied, "Hardly. They taught that because we are magical we're superior to the rest of the planet. Muggles were no better than cattle." Shaking his head sadly, Sirius elaborated, "I came to the idea that magic is to be respected on my own. Out of the ravings of my lunatic family, there was a nugget of truth." Nodding at his godson, Sirius added, " James' parents helped me the most with that bit."

"There's more, some of the customs regarding the solstices and Yule are very specific to magical Britain. Much of the mundane world takes them to be pagan practices, but the origination of the solstice festivals, Beltane, Samhain and Yule are rooted in magic. It would be a great loss to lose touch with what makes us magical Britons as opposed to Brazilians." Quaffing his drink, he quipped, "Where do you think Carnival comes from?"

Nodding, Steven agreed, "That makes sense."

Remus made his way into the room. His legs still pained him so he was moving slowly. Harry scurried to slide a chair out for the wounded werewolf. Narrowing his eyes, Midnight asked, "Moon bothering you on top of the legs?"

Moony nodded absently. It was three days until the full moon. Harry's gifted Wolfsbane potion had been arriving on time every evening in the post, so the deleterious effects of the lunar cycle had been moderated somewhat.

"Dora?" Remus asked.

"Still sleeping," Hermione replied. "We were up late talking last night," she smiled as she cut her eyes to Harry. In his turn, The Boy-Who-Lived smiled into his plate. Hermione had no secrets from her husband, so he knew all about Dora's plans.

When Remus' worried look didn't evaporate, Hermione softly added, "She was pretty sorry about snapping at you, though."

He nodded, the tension evaporated from his face as he settled into his meal. Sirius asked, "How long until you're up to full speed?"

After swallowing his bite of toast, Remus replied, "Probably a week for the both of us."

Sirius scowled at the delay before looking to Hermione for her opinion. Without looking up from her morning reading, she replied to Sirius' unspoken question, "We'll need the whole family. We'll have to wait before moving forward."

"I hate waiting," Sirius grumbled.

Harry checked the clock over the mantle. "What time was the meeting with Amelia?"

"Half seven," Steven replied.

Alastor and Minerva were meeting with Amelia Bones to lay the groundwork for the plan that Hermione had devised. Remus and Alastor had both made improvements to the plan, but it was much as she had envisioned it.

"Voldemort will think no one can stop him," Hermione had postulated the day Remus and Dora had returned from their inconsequential 'shopping trip'. "Albus is dead and Harry is still a child in his eyes. Fudge is an incompetent boob, so that leaves Amelia as Voldemort's only real hurdle. He has two stumbling blocks: The child of prophecy – Harry - and the only leader who could rally the government against him - Amelia. We give him what he wants, but on our terms. We bring both of his targets to the same place at the same time."

Harry had narrowed his eyes, "Are we going to be fighting in the Department of Mysteries again?"

With a saucy wink, she kissed her husband's cheek, "Yes, we are. But this time, it's our trap, not theirs."

After breakfast, Remus disappeared into his girlfriend's room. As soon as he was out of sight, Alice asked, "Is she going to ask today?"

Hermione smiled, "She didn't say when, just that she was going to ask."

"Ask what?" a befuddled Padfoot queried.

"Dora's going to ask Remus to marry her," Harry replied with a smile.

"Really?" Padfoot replied with a smile to match his godon's. "Wait. She didn't ask me for permission."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione threw a fork at her husband's godfather. "Don't be dolt."

"Remus' parents are dead, so I'm the closest thing he has to family," Sirius objected.

"Padfoot?" Harry asked.

"Yeah?"

"Shut up."

"Got it."

.oOo.

Minerva and Alastor arrived via Floo around ten o'clock. A quick Communication charm assembled the Family in the Lord's study. Remus Levitated Dora into the room as she lay on her lounge while the rest settled.

"How'd it go?" Hermione asked.

Moody's grunt in reply wasn't very inspiring.

"Mixed," Minerva replied more coherently as she stirred the milk into her tea. "In general she liked the idea of drawing Voldemort into the open, but voiced a few salient objections."

"What Minerva's pussy footing about is that Amelia is convinced that Voldemort is going to probably plan a big assault the day we advertise Potter and Amelia meeting. This diversion will draw off

most of the Auror forces leaving the Ministry building mostly defenceless."

"Except for us," Harry added.

"Aye, but she asked what the fuck good two third years are." When Hermione tutted, Moody growled, "I was quoting the Department Head, lassie. Keep your knickers on."

Interrupting the grumbling maimed Auror, Minerva carried on, "Obviously, we did not discuss your abilities or the contents of the prophecy."

"But you think we need to," Hermione summarized. Minerva merely nodded in reply.

Harry leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. "If we do make a public to-do in the Prophet about me going to the Ministry to fetch the prophecy orb, Voldemort will come."

He was thinking aloud, walking through the scenario, so the others were silent. Closing his eyes, he ruminated. "Voldemort wants the prophecy. He's afraid of the prophecy." Sitting up, he shot a panicked look to his wife, "What if he got it from Albus before he died?"

"Albus Dumbledore was many things, but it is unlikely that he'd betray that secret," Minerva stated with Moody's nod of agreement.

"Even under the Cruciatus?" Sirius asked.

"Even so." They all paused in thought. Harry couldn't help but grudgingly agree with Minerva's assessment. With an amused grunt, he wondered if Dumbledore's secretive nature had helped in his final moments.

Sobering, Harry contemplated the last hours of Albus Dumbledore's life. To say that they were most likely unpleasant would be an understatement. The Cruciatus curse was Voldemort's favourite torture tool, but hardly the only bolt in his quiver. As Harry's imagination plumbed the darkest spells and curses, he shivered when he realized that most, if not all had been used on Albus in his final hours.

In that moment, he decided to forgive the old man. Nothing Harry thought or cared could affect the old wizard. In the end, Albus Dumbledore was dead and didn't matter any longer. Hatred is an acid that damages its vessel, so said Mark Twain many years ago. It was true then and true now. Casting the vestiges of his resentment to the wind, he hoped that the manipulative old man had found a measure of peace after his intense suffering.

Resettling in his chair, Harry leaned back again to muse on the ceiling. "So. Voldemort will want the prophecy, as he's afraid of what it does or does not say. To wit, does it spell his doom? My going to the Ministry puts Amelia and myself in his grasp at the same time."

"But he'll want the Aurors out of the way," Hermione inserted. "It would make sense that he'll clear the field first. Last time, he laid the trap for us after hours so there was minimal staffing. This time it'll be in the middle of the day, so he'll need a reason for the Aurors to be somewhere else."

"Fire," Dora announced from her chair.

The rest goggled at her before a look of understanding melted on to Hermione's face. "He'll want to sow confusion in the building, so expect a fire, or an explosion or some such. It will confuse the people in the facility so that he can strike with ease." Dora nodded grimly, Hermione's thoughts matching her own.

"We're going to have to come clean with Bones, aren't we?" Harry asked the assembled.

"Yes," Minerva answered.

"Will she consent to a Vow?"

"No," Moody replied.

"Can we trust her?" Harry asked.

"Do we have any choice but to trust her?" Remus asked pointedly.

There was silence as the Family all considered the position. They would expose themselves and become vulnerable by disclosing the

truth about Harry and Hermione. "I really don't like this," Harry observed.

"You must be mistaking me for someone who gives a shit," Moody growled. "So far, you've taken very little risk. In all your raids, you've had not only the advantage of surprise, but also superior fighters. You've got in, killed them and got out. Hell, you required Unbreakable Vows before even saying word one about your story. Well, news flash here boy," Harry glared at the old Auror with the use of that Vernon Dursley special term, "This is war. Your risk is actually pretty low with Amelia, so quit your fucking whinging and make an appointment to meet with her before I drag you down there."

Harry and Hermione were caught flat-footed while Minerva regarded the children of her heart with a raised eyebrow. "He has a point," the new Headmistress of Hogwarts observed.

"Alastor," Harry began, "When this is all over I'm going to kick the fong out of you."

With a disturbing smile, the old Auror replied, "I look forward to it."

.oOo.

Dinner that night was subdued. Harry had sent Hedwig off with a missive to the Head of the DMLE, requesting an appointment in the near future. All expected a response inviting them to meet the next day. First thing in the morning, at that.

Toying with his Beef Wellington, Harry stared at his plate. Fear was creeping into his gullet, banishing his hunger. It had been an emotionally tiring day.

The long sigh from Dora caught his attention. When she cleared her throat, Harry smiled. The mischievous expression on her face could only mean one thing. Darting his gaze to Hermione, he saw her eyes twinkling with humour and affection. Neither had known Dora Lupin in the Future that Was, but the young metamorph had thoroughly wormed her way into the hearts of the Potters.

"Remus," Dora called, trying to get her beloved's attention.

"Hmm?" the Lycan muttered around a mouthful of potatoes. He was reading a tome he'd found in the back of the library which turned out to be a first-hand account of the life and reign of Charlemagne. The studious man had been lost to the world for the previous six hours.

"Lupin," Dora reiterated. She was becoming a bit testy.

"Hmm?" Moony repeated, still not putting down the book.

"Dammit Remus! Put the fucking book down and pay attention to me!"

Shocked, the former professor dropped the biography as he turned to his girlfriend. His eyes wide at her outburst, he asked, "What's wrong? Is your injury acting up?"

"No goddammit, I'm trying to ask you to marry me but you keep screwing around."

His expression imitating a punch-drunk boxer, Remus could only reply, "Hunh?"

"Yes, you," the now heavily blushing witch continued. "I love you and you love me. I want you to be next to me every morning as I wake up for the rest of my life. Will you marry me?" she finished with a hint of a scowl.

The stunned expression on Remus' face melted into wonder. The rest of the occupants of the room might as well have been on the moon as far as the young couple was concerned. Sirius watched the entire amusing exchange with a benevolent smile on his face. Hermione sniffled back a happy tear while Harry just smiled at all the love in the room.

Dora and Remus looked at each other for a long moment. Her scowl became a hopeful smile while a goofy grin grew on his face. "Yes. Yes, I'll marry you woman."

"WAHOO!" Sirius called as he jumped out of his seat. The room broke into cheers and laughter as Sirius danced a spastic jig around the embracing newly betrothed couple.

.oOo.

The reply from Amelia did come later that night. They had an appointment for nine AM the next day. While sobering the party some, the Family still gave themselves over to celebrating the engagement of Dora and Remus.

Harry leaned back in the seat, nursing his bitter as Hermione snuggled into his side. She'd done some fancy transfigurations to shift his chair into a loveseat. Apparently, Alice had used the Floo, because Minerva had just arrived to celebrate with Remus and Dora.

The usually staid woman was embracing the betrothed couple. "You know," Harry mentioned to his own bride, "Minerva's loosened up quite a bit."

Hermione nodded while she sipped at her coffee. "It took a war last time to force her out of her shell. This time, it just took a family who loved her as much as she loved them in turn."

Caught up in the mood, Harry turned to his wife, "I love you, babe."

She smiled up at him. "Love you too." She frowned when his face got a funny expression.

"Be right back," he shouted over his shoulder as he stood up and sprinted out of the room.

The party paused as everyone looked to Hermione for an explanation. Shrugging, she snarked, "You expect me to really keep him under control?"

"Yes," the chorus of voices answered her.

Blowing a raspberry at them all, she settled down to wait for Harry to return from wherever he'd absconded.

She was in the middle of listening to a very humorous recitation by Sirius of one of Mr Moony's more dastardly escapades when Mr Midnight skittered into the room.

Harry's expression was determined as he marched up to his bride. Hermione gave him a friendly quizzical look. He ignored her unspoken question as he moved in front of her. Standing silently in

front of his mate, Harry caused her to sit up straight. "Love, what are you on about?" she asked.

The rest of the party paused to watch the time travelling couple. Slowly, Harry knelt on both knees in front of Hermione. Taking her hands in his, he told her, "I love you. I've bent the laws of time and space for you and would do much worse if that's what it took to be with you. You are my rock and my fount. You are my everything. Without you, I wouldn't be me and without me, I'm fairly sure you wouldn't be you."

She nodded wetly as a tear of love rolled down her cheek.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small velvet box. "When we last married, we didn't have rings. We both agreed it was too dangerous to draw attention to ourselves. Now, though," he paused as he opened the box. "Now, we can do it right."

Holding up the box that held a solitaire two carat diamond ring in a Tiffany setting, Harry asked, "We've considered ourselves married since we came back in time, but I want to do it right, this go round. Will you marry me?"

The crowd was all smiles. Steven was beaming as he pulled Alice close. Remus and Dora were grinning and sharing soft kisses. Minerva watched the children of her heart with a warm smile. To the surprise of the other observers, Sirius had tears running down his face. Remus silently handed his friend a handkerchief. "Fuck you Moony," Sirius blubbed. Remus merely smiled.

"Oh, yes, Harry. A thousand times in a thousand lifetimes. I'll marry you."

In a moment of silent appreciation, the Family watched Harry reverently slide the ring on to Hermione's finger. With a delicacy that was fitting, he softly kissed first her ring, then her hand before placing a soft kiss on her lips.

In the silence, Minerva observed loud enough for all to hear, but still very softly, "It's fitting that we celebrate life and love."

It was unspoken that it was fitting to celebrate life and love with the prospect of loss and death coming in the near future.

.oOo.

At eight fifty three the next morning, Harry, Hermione and Sirius arrived in the Ministry atrium via the Floo. Met by Dora and Alastor, they silently made their way to Amelia Bones' office. The atrium was fairly busy so the group of five caused a buzz as they wended their way through the crowds.

Entering the executive wing of the Ministry, Harry admired the portraits of famous wizards and witches from Britain's past. Unthinkingly, he reached out. Entwining his fingers with Hermione's he calmed. She always calmed him, regardless of the situation.

Mad-Eye paused at a secretary's station, mumbling to the young witch behind the desk. The blonde girl popped up from her chair when she noticed who was in the party to see the Director. Not only was it The Boy-Who-Lived, but also Sirius Black and old Mad-Eye Moody. Scurrying back out from Bones' office, she announced, "The Director will see you now."

The Director of Magical Law Enforcement for Her Majesty's Subjects in Great Britain and Northern Ireland was an imposing woman. Not in body, for she was a mere five foot three inches tall and very petite. No, the sheer force of her personality flooded any room she occupied.

Short hair that had once been a shocking red was cut in a conservative style that topped a monocled face. Hermione reckoned that at one time Amelia Bones had been a beautiful witch, but now, her looks were weather worn and tired. Still a very pretty woman, her personality was vibrant and powerful.

With a genial nod of her head, Bones indicated the seats across from her desk. Moody conjured his own off to the side, where he could see all the people in the room at the same time. Dora stood to the side of the old Master Auror, her presence in the meeting was solely due to her relation to Harry.

Bones gave The Boy-Who-Lived an evaluative look before greeting them all, "Minerva and Alastor tell me some interesting things. She tells me that I need to talk to the two of you and trust what you tell me."

With a humorous expression, she glanced at the grumbling Mad-Eye, "I didn't think that Alastor trusted anyone, but when he categorically stated that he trusted the two of you with his life, I knew that I had to talk to you."

Stunned at the support from Mad-Eye, Harry glanced at his disfigured comrade only to see Mad-Eye determinedly inspecting the door with both his magical and human eyes. With a soft smile, Harry told Bones, "I consider that one of the highest praises I can imagine, Director. I shall endeavour to live up to Alastor's confidence in me."

Another evaluative look from Bones preceded her blunt statement, "You don't talk like a fourteen year old."

"True."

She'd obviously been expecting more of an explanation than Harry's agreement and her annoyance was plain. Rolling her eyes, she chided, "Look, I'm a busy witch and don't have a lot of time to waste. You wanted to talk to me. Talk."

Hermione began the explanation. "We've only told nine other people this information. Of the nine, seven are magical and we've required Unbreakable Vows from five of those seven. Can we trust you to keep our secrets?"

Since they all figured that Amelia wouldn't agree to a Vow, they decided to appeal to her honour. Alastor and Minerva had both concurred that Amelia Bones had a strong sense of honour and enough pride to get her back up in a good way should her integrity be challenged. So challenge it they would.

"Lives would be lost should this information become public," Harry continued. Leaning toward the now scowling Director, he added, "Thousands and even millions of lives."

"Enough with the melodramatics you two," Bones snapped. "Get on with it. I'll take your secrets to the grave only so long as they don't cause me to go against my conscience or any other Vow I've made."

Harry nodded, "That's good enough."

Hermione began the now familiar recitation, "We have the memories of our twenty seven year old selves..."

Five minutes later, Amelia had cancelled all her before lunch appointments. Ten minutes after that, she cancelled all her appointments for the day.

"Bloody bugging shite," the DMLE head muttered when the Potters had finished their story. Summing up the purpose of the entire visit in one sentence, she exclaimed, "We need to kill him now, before he become too powerful."

Pleased that Amelia had said 'Kill' as opposed to 'Arrest' or even 'Stop', Harry nodded. "I'm not sure if the prophecy told all those years ago is worth the orb in which it's housed, but I think I need to be the one to engage Voldemort."

Without missing a beat, Bones countered, "Can you finish him?"

Frowning, Harry asked, "Are you asking if I can kill him or if I can kill him?" the emphasis on the different words told different stories. The first questioned his ability to kill anyone. The second questioned his ability to kill the highly proficient, skilled and vicious wizard who styled himself as Lord Voldemort.

"Both."

"Unfortunately, killing isn't a real problem. Do I have the skills necessary to kill him?" Turning to his once and future wife, Harry nodded.

"Hopefully, we won't need to have a full on engagement where wands are drawn at twenty paces and so on."

Narrowing her eyes in concentration, Bones ordered, "Tell me."

.oOo.

Remus and Dora were awake and waiting for the Potters and Sirius to return. It was nearly midnight when the exhausted group Apparated into the entrance hall. Stumbling into the family sitting room, all three collapsed on the couches. As if on cue, Steven

Granger ambled into the room. His forced nonchalance fooled no one.

"So?" Dora asked.

Harry nodded while Hermione curled into his side. The Smartest Witch of the Age closed her eyes as she relaxed into her husband. She had to smile. He was also her fiancée. And her best friend. Wasn't that how it was supposed to be?

"Amelia believed everything," Sirius explained for the wiped out teenagers. Grimacing, he cut to a late breaking development during their discussions, "Shacklebolt's in the know, now."

Frowning, Remus asked, "How much in the know is he?" Obviously, he was asking if Shacklebolt knew of the time travel.

Shaking his head, Sirius rubbed his temples, "He knows of the upcoming trap and our involvement. It was rather amusing; he looked at Midnight and Longtooth with this confused expression. Then he turns to Bonesie and starts to question why the youngsters were there when she gets this glare that just shut him down like Minerva does a firstie. It was fantastic."

"Padfoot's in love," Harry teased. "He called Amelia 'Bonesie' for the rest of the meeting." With a weak guffaw, he needled, "He flirted with her so much I think her hair was dyed red from all her blushing."

"She's a damn fine looking woman," Padfoot protested.

"Anyway," Remus interrupted, diffusing the situation. Part of him was happy that Padfoot was beginning to warm up to the world. At the same time, he remembered all too well Harry's accurate admonishment that he should stay the hell out of Sirius' personal life.

"Anyway, what was the result?"

"The short of it is that she's on board. We've taken Longtooth's plan and started to make it practical based on the Ministry's layout and our known personnel and capabilities."

"Who are you planning to be there?" Dora asked with more than a hint of anxiety. Since her injury, she'd been plagued with guilt about her inability to help the Family in the fight in a more active manner.

"You're on the team, cousin," Harry reassured her through his closed eyes. He was leaning back while resting his head on a pillow. Hermione was asleep on his shoulder.

"Minerva, Moody, us," Sirius twirled his finger to include all gathered, minus Steven, of course. "Amelia insisted on being included," he added with a smirk. In an undertone, he repeated, "Damn fine woman."

"Anyway," Moony interrupted.

"Yeah, Amelia, Shacklebolt and maybe one or two other Aurors. She agreed that Snake Lips will probably have a massive off site diversion to clear out the Aurors from the Ministry. Hogsmeade is the best bet. We'll have to be ready. At the same time, Voldemort will only be able to show at the Ministry with a small force because of that. He'll have to make the big throw of his forces at his diversion or else it won't be credible enough to suck all the Aurors out of Headquarters."

Harry's stuttering snore jolted them all out of planning mode. With the delicacy that all fathers learn, Steven stepped to his children. Nodding to Sirius, Steven scooped Hermione into his arms while Padfoot gently picked up his godson. Together they took the couple to their bedroom. After placing the Potters in bed, minus their shoes and socks, they quietly left the master suite.

"Long day for them?" Steven asked.

Sirius nodded absently. After a moment, he turned to Hermione's dad, "How do you do it?"

Jerking his head toward the Master Suite, Steven asked, "About them?" When Padfoot nodded his reply, Steven replied, "I'm not sure. Some days my fear for their safety grows into terror. Those days I don't let Alice out of bed. That closeness with her helps. Some of those days I cry my eyes out."

Steven didn't make eye contact after that admission, but Sirius didn't think badly of the man. In fact, he respected Steven for his courage to admit it.

"Once I got sotted, but that just made everything worse. Alice harangued my arse while the hangover was bad. Wasn't worth it." Sighing, he added, "Physical exercise helps some. You know how I run every day?" Sirius nodded. "It helps."

"So what you're saying is that you're hanging on by a thread. Some days you shag your wife blind, other days you're a trembling wreck and every day you try to exercise the demons. In the end, you're just hanging on until this is all over."

"Pretty much."

"Christ, I need to get laid."

Steven laughed. Clapping his hand on his friend's shoulder he corrected, "No, you need a girlfriend."

Understanding Steven's meaning, Padfoot barked a laugh as he nodded.

.oOo.

Deciding to set the pace of the build up to confrontation, Amelia arranged the first move. It began with a simple throwaway comment during the standard weekly interview with the beat reporter from the Prophet. After covering the proposed agriculture stimulus package in front of the Wizengamot, Amelia dropped her little bomb.

"Oh, a little tidbit for the gossip mongers. The Boy-Who-Lived will be coming into the Ministry on Friday. Apparently, there's an old prophecy on record that we believe may pertain to him. We're hoping he can shed some light on the situation."

Months later, while on a dinner date, Amelia later told Sirius that she had to suppress a laugh at the reporter's expression. The poor boy looked like he was on the verge of peeing his robes in his excitement.

Needless to say, the headlines of the paper the next day didn't focus on the effort by the Ministry to force magical Britain to become more self-sufficient by relying on magical farmers as opposed to muggle food suppliers.

Boy-Who-Lived; prophecy bound?

Harry had to laugh, "And once again, I become 'The Chosen One' in the media. Joy."

Hermione had given him a shove before dragging him to the practice room. The Potters and Sirius had been duelling hard the last week or so. Honing the edge of their skills to a razor sharp edge, they duelled each other in a melee fashion, occasionally co-opting Alastor into their drills. What the beaten up old Auror lacked in mobility he more than made up for in craftiness and downright meanness.

Eventually, Dora and Remus joined them. Steven had watched from behind the safety of a duelling shield. When the entire family, Minerva and Alastor included, let go for an hour long go, he'd been agog. Even when he was at the top of his form in 2Para, he'd never seen such a deadly fighting force.

"How can any stand against you?" he muttered as they all left to get cleaned up.

"Because Voldemort is better," Harry replied.

.oOo.

The week had passed quickly. While the Family was honing their battle skills, the Prophet was working itself into a frenzy approaching religious fervour.

HAS The Boy-Who-Lived ALREADY SAVED US?

WILL POTTER SAVE US AGAIN?

And so on.

"Load of tripe," Alice commented as she read the morning paper. "Look at this crap," she exclaimed, pointing to a section of the paper

"Our expert Divination team has incontrovertible belief that The Boy-Who-Lived will one day save not only all of magical Britain, but the entire world."

Dropping the news rag with a loud crunching of paper, she stared at Harry, "How do they have 'incontrovertible belief'?"

With humour, Harry snorted, "Because the Prophet paid the team to say that?"

Steven laughed as he reached for the salt, "Too true, son."

"But it doesn't even make sense!" Alice objected as she resumed reading the paper.

Hermione rolled into the room, her curls still damp from her shower. Kissing him atop his head, she muttered, "Morning, love."

Handing her an opened letter, he told her, "Bones wants us to meet tonight, after hours."

Hermione read the letter as she poured tea for herself. "Hmmm, makes sense...familiarization of the facility...meet with the other defenders...don't like that part."

"Neither do I," Harry agreed. Turning to Sirius, he asked, "Can you get that turned off?"

"Bad idea, Midnight," Sirius countered. Slathering cream on his scone, Sirius took a big bite. After swallowing, he explained via a question, "Do you want to go into a fire fight where you're unsure if all the good guys know if you're a good guy?"

"But..." Harry objected but was cut off by Remus.

"Harry, you don't have to explain your presence. Amelia isn't an idiot, she won't tell the Aurors any more than they have to know."

"Damn fine woman," Padfoot muttered.

"Would you just go shag the woman already?" Harry teased.

Sirius expression was affronted, "I'll have you know that if the lovely Director Bones would ever be so gracious to turn her affections in my direction, I would never be as crass and crude as to 'shag' her."

There was a long moment of silence before the entire table burst into laughter. "Ok, ok," Sirius admitted through his chuckles, "I'll stop praising her if you all leave off. Deal?"

"Deal!" the rest of the table exclaimed.

.oOo.

Strolling through the semi darkened corridors of the Ministry of Magic brought back unpleasant memories for both Harry and Hermione. More than one time, one or both would check to make sure that Sirius was still with them.

"I really am not liking this plan," Harry muttered.

Hermione knew that words were useless at this point. She didn't want to hear anyone tell her, "Oh, it'll be alright," or "Everything will be fine." This was war. It was a very high possibility that someone she loved would die in the upcoming operation and the idea scared her witless. Based on his mutterings, it did the same to her husband.

Turning the last corner, they saw a room with light pouring out into the darkened hall. Tonks was leading the group so she turned in first, followed by Remus and Sirius. Harry and Hermione were last.

There were a half dozen Aurors in the room clustered about a sand table. Amelia Bones was discussing something in the corner with Kingsley Shacklebolt. Both ended their discussion when they saw the Family arrive.

"Good. Let's get started." The Aurors flowed to the seats while the family filled in the empty spots among the crowd. With a no nonsense tone, Amelia announced, "Lord Voldemort has assumed human form again. Our objective tomorrow night is to destroy him once and for all."

"Nothing like jumping in the deep end", Harry muttered into Hermione's ear. She gave a short nod accompanied by a small sigh to agree with him.

The stunned silence from the Aurors gave Amelia a moment to elaborate, "The how or why isn't the issue at this point. Trust me when I tell you that he is returned and we shall destroy him and his most devoted followers.

"As you may have noticed in the Prophet over the last week, there's a bit of a bother about a prophecy and young Mister Potter, here." She waved nonchalantly at Harry with her left hand. As the others turned to stare at Harry, he gave them a jaunty wave and smile.

"It's true," she stated baldly. "There is a prophecy and it says that only Mister Potter can kill the Dark Lord, hence his inclusion in this discussion and tomorrow night's operation." When the Aurors all frowned en masse at the idea of a thirteen year old boy confronting the most dangerous wizard in a score of score of years, she waved her hand at their worries. "He has the full backing of Alastor Moody. Mad-Eye even said he'd go into battle with Harry."

That was good enough for the Aurors. The worried expressions regarding Harry's ability became worried expressions of how they'd survive the engagement twenty four hours hence.

"The Prophet shall run a story in the morning edition tomorrow explaining how Mister Potter shall be here tomorrow early in the afternoon to examine this prophecy. This is the bait to lure the Dark Lord out of hiding so we can kill him. We fully expect there to be a massive distraction off sight to empty the building so that he can infiltrate the facility to intercept Mr Potter. When this distraction happens, Head Auror Scrimgeour shall react with any and all forces necessary. Everyone shall go, except those in this room.

"No one else knows of the situation or our plan and it shall remain that way. Therefore, every one of you shall make an Unbreakable Vow with Auror Shackbolt before leaving. If you'd like, you may remain in the barracks until tomorrow evening. That ought to remove you from the opportunity to accidentally disclose this information."

Pausing, Amelia looked down at the table. Gathering her thoughts, she was interrupted by a bold question, "Ma'am, does Head Auror Scrimgeour know of this op?" When she focused her gaze on the man, he visibly quailed, "I just want to know if he asks why we aren't following his orders."

"I've dealt with that. No one knows and no one shall know. Now, back to the plan..."

.oOo.

Waiting. It sucked.

Harry slouched back in the standard issue government chair, staring at the intersection of the wall and the ceiling. They were plaster, so he couldn't even count the holes in the suspended ceiling tiles like at muggle offices.

Hermione had just headed off to the toilet with Dora, leaving the Marauders and Midnight to their own devices. Not a good plan.

"So, I'm thinking that I'm going to take Bonesie to dinner tonight," Sirius stated without preamble.

"Hope springs eternal for fools," Harry mocked in a deadpan tone. "Do you pray to Saint Jude, too?"

"You're just jealous that a hot number like Bonesie is on the trail of the immortal sexy beast that is Padfoot."

Thoroughly amused, Harry looked at his godfather. The preening expression on Sirius' face was so genuine, Harry couldn't tell if the man was joking or not. A glance at Remus gave away nothing. As usual, Moony was unreadable.

Harry's low chuckle was infectious. Soon Padfoot had joined him, followed by Moony. By the time the girls had returned from the WC, their men plus Padfoot were howling like loons.

.oOo.

Minerva strode into the Ready Room at four in the afternoon to find the balance of her family pouring over blueprints of the facility. The goal was to entrap Voldemort and his Death Eaters in a murderous crossfire as they entered the lift to descend to the Department of Mysteries. Dark Lord or not, it's human nature to congregate in front of a lift and therefore the perfect place to cut down their quarry.

Hermione had the family studying the layout of the rest of the Ministry facility in a twofold effort. First off, it staved off the combined boredom and tension. The second reason was thoroughness in the vein of Mad-Eye: Constant Vigilance.

Alastor was explaining to Harry and Sirius how the lift worked as Hermione caught the new Headmistress of Hogwarts attention. Following the teen/twenty something year old witch to the corner, she had to smile. While not the child of her body, Hermione was most definitely the child of her heart.

When Hermione reached out and took both her hands in her own, Minerva frowned. "I love you, Minerva. Then and now, you've been far more than a teacher and mentor. A second mother, a friend and a wonderful person. I want you to know that I love you."

The Scot's frown deepened. "No more of that, lass," she scolded. Her burr was pronounced, as she was het up. "Neither of us is going to die, so none of this saying goodbye."

The reproachful expression on Hermione's face accentuated the gentle rebuke, "Minerva..."

Sighing, the older woman took the younger in her arms. Since her rape, she'd barely touched another person, but in the last months, she embraced and been embraced more times in the all the years since she'd been violated. It was a good thing; healing and loving at the same time.

Hermione hugged Minerva with all her might. There was no role that accurately described the woman's role in her life. Mother, friend, confidante, comrade, teacher, mentor, Grandmother. All were true, and yet, none were true. Her importance and role in her life defied description or classification. She was merely Minerva.

.oOo.

The family and the accompanying Aurors waiting in teams of two. Harry and Hermione, Remus and Dora, Sirius and Minerva waited in pairs in a semi-circle ringing the lift, while Amelia and Shacklebolt had the most dangerous location, just to the left of the lift itself. The balance of the Aurors filled in the gaps between the family, but to be honest, Harry didn't consider them to be of any account. He'd seen

Star Trek far too many times and these men all had 'red shirt' painted on their forehead.

The plan was simple. Wait until the invading Death Eater force clumped about the lift then kill them. Whether Voldemort would accompany his Death Eaters was an unknown, though. In the previous timeline, he hadn't accompanied his minions. This time, though, he had both Amelia Bones and Harry Potter within his grasp. His indigenous support had been decimated, forcing him to rely on foreign fighters. Hermione had reasoned that the Dark Lord had to be nearly desperate to quash his opposition so as to rebuild his British support base. It was unlikely that the wizard born Tom Riddle would trust foreign-born support for very long. A bigot is a bigot, is a bigot, she'd reasoned. He hated muggleborns and foreigners with an equal passion.

The Communication charm sounded in their ears in Amelia Bones' voice, "We were wrong. His distraction is to burn Central London. Over twenty blocks are burning with reports of three Dragons overhead. Hold your positions, they'll be coming soon."

Wrapping his arm around his Disillusioned wife, Harry shuddered. He heard her soft voice gasp, "Dear Lord. So many..."

All around them, groups of people sprinted to the Apparition area. Obliviators, Aurors, Magical Creature Control personnel, administrative personnel who could perform basic first aid. Anyone and everyone were leaving. It looked like the entire Ministry was emptying to deal with this massive catastrophe. Not only was it an epic breach of the Statute of Secrecy, but also a human cataclysm as well. It was likely that St Mungo's was clearing decks in preparation for a massive influx of wounded.

When the wave of leaving humanity trickled to an end, Harry heard Sirius snicker, "Wonder if the last person out turned out the lights?"

Smiling slightly at the joke, Harry waited.

He only had to wait for ten minutes. In a flicker of pseudo motion, a group of twenty Death Eaters appeared, probably by Portkey. All were masked and robed, so Harry couldn't identify any of them. Eyes searching, Harry looked for his target. His only required target for the engagement.

There.

In the back of the group was Lord Voldemort. Tall and pale, he glared about the atrium.

Tension spiked in Harry. He was so close. Thirty metres and Voldemort was dead. Thirty metres and it was all over.

He was so wrong.

The Death Eaters fanned out slightly as they traversed the open space, their boots clicking on the obsidian floor. The lead minion of Riddle reached the lift and waited. Without looking back, he stood there, staring at the closed metal door.

Frowning at the odd behaviour, Harry shook it off as irrelevant. Twenty metres to his destiny.

Ten.

Five.

Harry held his breath as he watched the Lord Voldemort pass his hiding place.

Harry had first shot. Amelia had threatened her Aurors with dismissal and decapitation should they fire before The Boy-Who-Lived. Voldemort's death was paramount. It turned out to be the easiest of the day, as well.

It is very difficult to cast a spell accurately when Disillusioned. One cannot see their own wand in order to line up the spell correctly. Therefore, as soon as Tom Riddle passed Harry, the time traveling teen raised his wand.

"Confringo."

The Dark Lord exploded like a pumpkin.

Before the bits of gore and blood hit the floor, the rest of the ambush team was casting. Ten more Death Eaters died within moments before the survivors scattered.

Four Aurors died to a wide area Cutting curse.

Harry dodged a Killing curse.

He felt Hermione roll in front of him as she evaded a Cruciatus curse.

Screams from across the way sounded vaguely like Kingsley Shacklebolt. In the back of his mind, Harry hoped it wasn't the big burly Auror, he seemed like a good sort.

Cast, cast, cast. Reductor, Bone Breaking, Bone Exploding.

Shielding a Slicing hex, he smiled. Minerva was at work as the Atrium came alive. Rubble transformed to attacking wolves. The fountain of magical brethren became trolls. The columns became animated trees..

Overwhelmed, the shrinking Death Eater force began to fall as wheat before the scythe.

It had been forty seconds since Harry had killed Riddle.

A blow from the side sent Harry sprawling. The next thing he saw was a masked Death Eater hoist Hermione over his shoulder. As the Disillusionment charm faded on The Boy-Who-Lived, the Death Eater turned to Harry and laughed.

"Got your bitch, Potter! First I got Dumbledore, now you!"

Severus Snape.

Before Harry could stand, the Half Blood Prince reached into a pocket before vanishing, taking Hermione with him.

Panic flooded Harry with adrenalin. Sprinting to one of the few Death Eaters who remained standing, he tackled the man. Punching the man in the face repeatedly shattered the mask and subdued him. Moving to straddle the Death Eater's chest, he began searching his captive's pockets for any item which could be a portkey.

The man's rasping, gurgling laughter forced Harry to focus on his face.

"You'll never find them."

Completely panicked, Harry screamed, "WHERE ARE THEY!"

"Never."

Harry reached down and ripped the man's left ear off his head. Nonchalantly, he tossed the bloody detached appendage to the side.

Screaming now, the man thrashed in pain. A slap from Harry brought him round.

Leaning into his face, Harry snarled, "Where are they?"

"Left...left pocket there's a yellow thread. It's the Portkey," the man panted in pain.

Not bothering to wait for reinforcements, Harry reached with his right hand into the pocket. He knew he'd found the thread when he was sucked into the magical vortex of a portkey.

.oOo.

Harry and the Death Eater arrived in the darkened entryway of an old house. Reflexively, Harry pointed his wand at the Death Eater's throat. "Where are they?" he whispered.

"Don't know," the man whimpered through broken teeth and split lips..

"Reducto," Harry incanted in reply. The man was going to die the moment he picked up his wand in support of Riddle. Now was as good a time as any for him to die. Besides, Harry didn't want to have a live opponent at his back.

Standing, he absently cast a Cleaning charm on himself. "Quarter the house? Room by room? Fuck it. Hominem Revelo!"

Two red lights flashed in the direction of upstairs.

"Silencio." His feet were Silenced.

A tap on the top of his head Disillusioned himself.

A wave of his wand gathered a handful of dirt into his left hand.

Slowly, he moved up the stairs, staying to the side to avoid tell tale noises. At the top, he paused, listening. Another incantation of Hominem Revelao caused him to turn to the left.

The upstairs hall was decorated from another age. Fabric wallpaper was rotting off the wall as his slow footsteps kicked up clouds of dust. Harry noted it all but ignored it as irrelevant.

The door at the end of the hall was shut. A repeat cast of the spell showed two people back there.

After checking the layout of the rooms on either side of the last door, he took a deep breath. Harry then did something very risky. He blind Apparated into the room. Figuring Snape had the door booby trapped, warded and watched, he bypassed it altogether.

His wand up and tracking, he appeared in the room facing his father's nemesis.

"Reducto!"

Snape dodged the spell, allowing it to impact the wall behind Snape. Two feet from where the unconscious Hermione was bound to the wall.

Harry's eyes widened in horror. If he missed Snape again, he could very well hit Hermione. It was nearly as good as having the witch tied to Snape's chest as a living shield.

"Sectumsempra!" To an experienced duellist, the Disillusionment charm is no barrier. It did give Harry the first shot.

The dark Slicing curse laid open Harry's arm. Blood spurted from the wound as pain flooded his nervous system.

Clenching his jaw, he rolled to his right, casting the dirt in the air as he did so. Mid roll, he cast the transfiguration spell he'd been practicing for weeks.

The dirt became eight circular saw blades, spinning at high speed.

After a momentary pause, they all shot through the air toward Severus Snape.

The man's screams echoed off the walls as he fell to the ground in sixteen pieces.

Trembling in pain, Harry pulled himself across the floor. Grimacing as he passed through the remains of Severus Snape, he used a chair to help him stand. Deciding to try the simple answer first, he pointed his wand at Hermione and incanted, "Finite incantatem."

The witch slumped to the floor, still unconscious.

Harry fell to the floor next to her, pulling her into his lap.

"Please God, don't let her be dead."

It was the same, yet not. He could feel the rain that wasn't there. The non-existent mud chilled his legs.

"Please God, don't let her be dead."

Tears fell from his face to hers. They dotted her white skin and blue lips. An emotional baptism, they did nothing to change the inevitable. With trembling hands, he caressed her face. Sobs wracked his body.

"Not again. Please God, don't let her be dead."

His blood pooled under him, but he ignored it. Leaning down, he placed a hesitant kiss on her lips. He nearly screamed when she returned the kiss with a miniscule movement in her lips.

Shuffling her out of his lap, he leaned over her. His bloody hand on her throat found a pulse. Now his tears were of relief. Taking her in his arms, he stood. A little shaky, he twisted in place. A sharp crack announced their departure.

.oOo.

"Hey."

Turning away from the sea, Harry faced his godfather. "Yeah?"

"She's ready."

Nodding, he straightened his tie and jacket. Before following Padfoot inside. Moving behind Remus, Neville and Sirius, he followed them inside the church. Eventually, they all found their way to the appointed spots.

The heavily pregnant Dora Lupin headed the procession. All the men smiled at her as she tripped, nearly spilling onto the Minister for Magic. All smiles, Fudge steadied the woman before she finished her walk.

Luna Lovegood floated down next, all ethereal beauty and grace.

Minerva came last, resplendent in her robes the tartan of clan McGonagall peeking out of her sleeve.

Finally, it was Her turn.

Harry's breath caught in his throat when Hermione came into view.

She was beautiful.

Shimmering in white, she processed down the aisle. It seemed forever and yet took no time at all. Finally, she took his extended hand. Harry finally noticed that Steven was there when he kissed his daughter before nodding to Harry.

Together Harry and Hermione turned to face the priest who began with the ritual words known the world 'round.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today..."

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to all who reviewed this story. Story status, as always, can be found on my Author's page on FanFiction(dot)net.

2. Recommendation for the chapter is The Harmony Bond, by brigrove.

3. Sorry it took so long, but as anyone else who reads my stuff, Last Casualties has dominated my muse for the last few weeks. That, combined with real life (father of three here!) has eaten into my spare time.

For those surprised by the easy dispatch of the Dark Lord, remember, the story has always been about Harry and Hermione and their love, not the conflict between Harry and Tom Riddle. I was stuck for a while before the Snape kidnapping solution presented itself to me (around chapter 3 of LC). It may seemed to have ended abruptly, but it's always been about them.

4. Many many inspirations during the writing of this story. I listen to music as I write, so nods to Led Zeppelin, the Cranberries, Taylor Swift, Bob Dylan, Wolfgang Mozart, Paramore, Muse, Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Pat Benatar, Ludwig Von Beethoven, Bullet for My Valentine, Dion, Breaking Benjamin, Pink Floyd and the list goes on.

5. I hope you enjoyed my little tale, it was a lot of fun to write and I do believe that I shall miss writing it. I've come to like and love these characters of E&B. Later...